Everybody's

August, 1927

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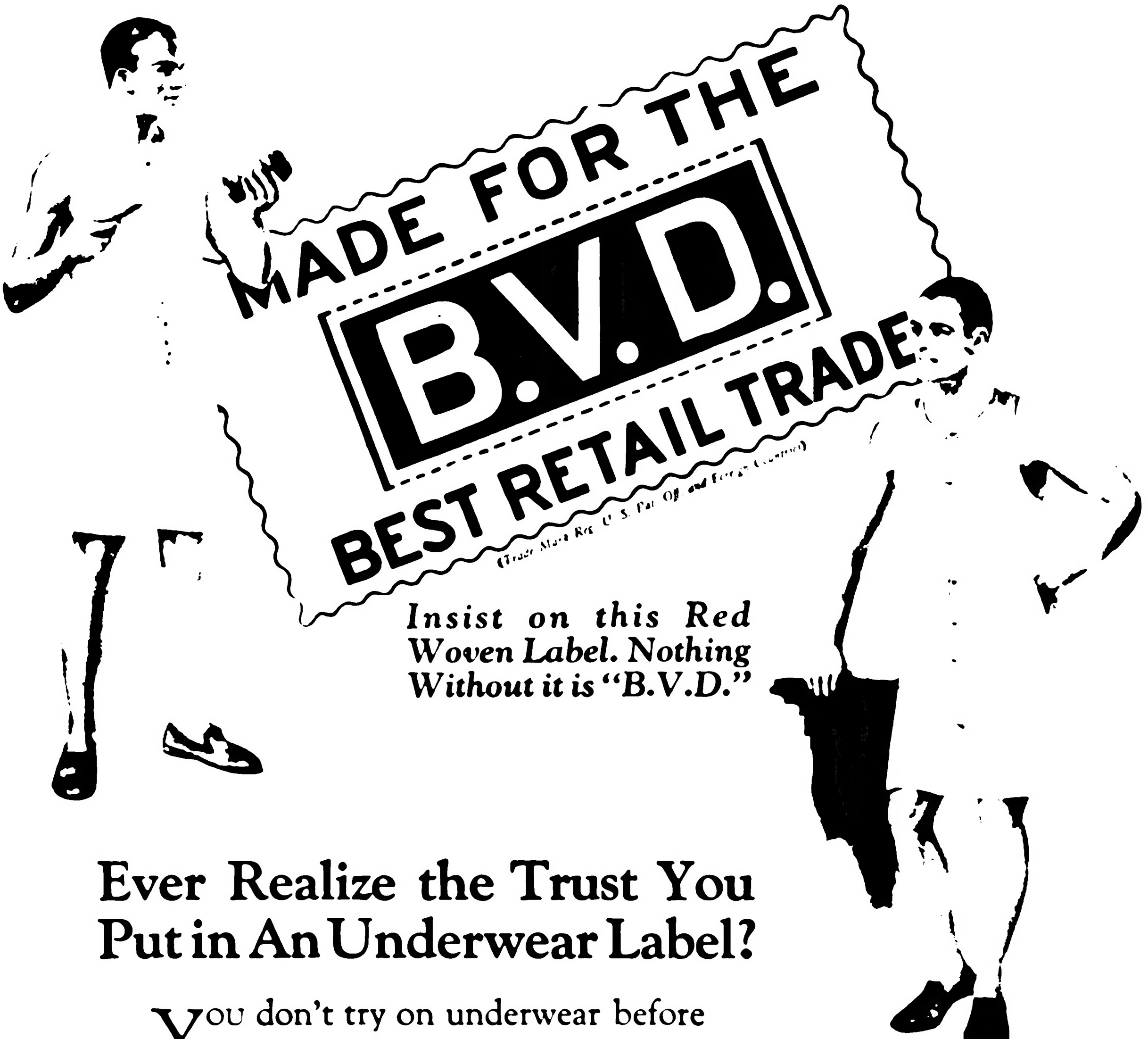
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August, 1927
Vol. LVII No. 2

Everybody's

OSCAR GRAEVE
Editor

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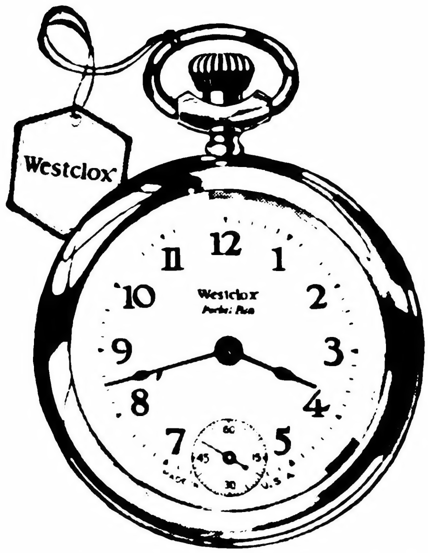

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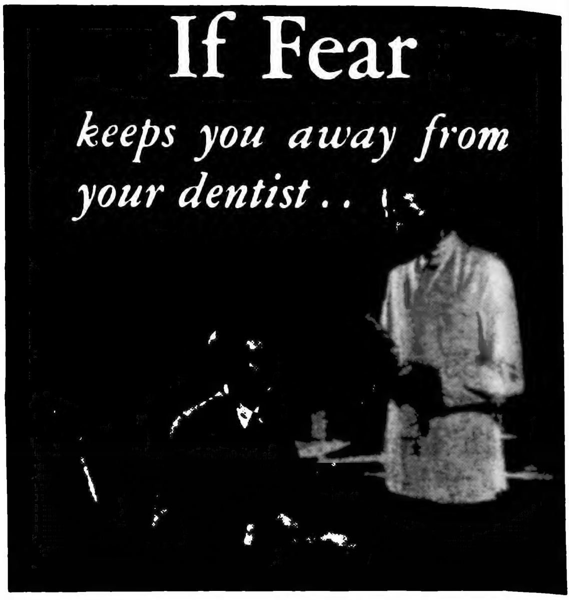

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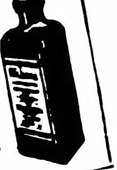
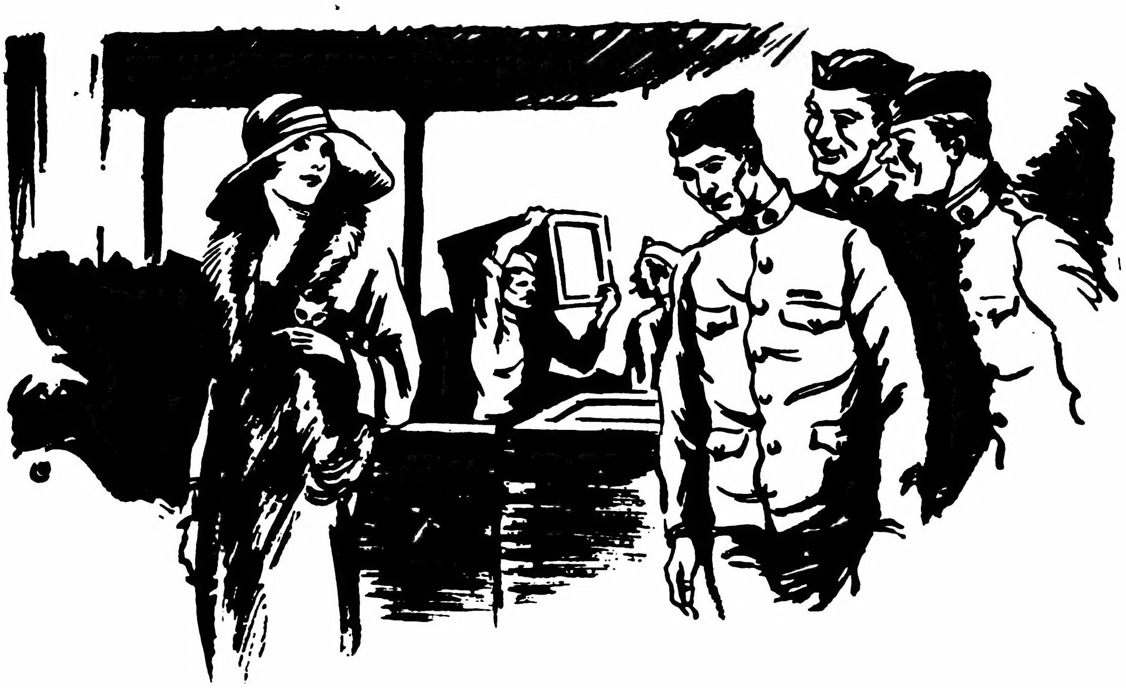




H. M. SUTHERLAND

Tells the ludicrous adventures of three doughboys and twenty-five cats in

The Cat's MEOW

FIRST time me and Buck and Little Abe heard about our transfer to that Cat-Stealin' brigade of the Chemical Warfare Service was when the shavey in charge of our detachment called us over to the office one mornin' and handed us our papers. If I'd 'a' had a suspicion that we was headed for the sort of a cat-astrophe that we busted into, which included the biggest blowup that the provost marshal, old T.N.T. hisself, ever staged, I'd 'a' been A.W.O.L. from there *toute de suite*, or sooner.

You see, me and Buck and Abe wasn't overly anxious to make a change just then because at that time we was attached to a supply outfit back in rest billet at Candas and ever'thing was slidin' along to the merry-merry. What I mean, we was livin' on the fat of the land, us bein' stationed at the railhead that way and havin' first grab at the rations when they come up for the division—ham, oatmeal, dates, strawberry jam and tea. We was in trainin' in the British sector along the Somme front, goin' to four o'clock teas, and teachin' a outfit of Anzacs how to shoot crap, all of which was a satin-lined luxury to what we'd been havin', and also what was to come.

Moreover, we'd been spendin' a pleasant evenin' or so over at a nearby burg called Beauval, and this order tellin' us to report to the lieut's office, comin' as it did the mornin' after an unusually joyous little *soiree* over there, didn't sound so good to me, but I didn't say nothin' to the boys about it. From lookin' at their faces I was pretty sure the idea was unanimous anyhow.

I ain't sure yet whether or not that shavetail had anything on us. He didn't give us time to find out.

"You three men," he says without any preliminaries, "will report for duty to Lieutenant Marquand of the Chemical Warfare Service at Samer today. Your transfers came through this morning. Here are some papers you will present upon your arrival there."

We sort of looked at each other wonderin' what it was all about, and then we marched out. On reachin' the street Little Abe comes to a halt.

"What I want to know," he says slowly, "is which is why, what, when, how much, and whereabouts?"

"You can search me," replied Buck, gazin' thoughtfully at the papers in his hand. "I've seen some of them C.W.S. birds goin' around and stickin' signs up over mud holes sayin', 'DANGEROUS—DO NOT DRINK.' Mebbe they wants us to do the tastin' and see how dangerous 'tis."

"That let's Abe out," I informs him. "He ain't tasted water since he landed. But *c'est la guerre*, as these French people say! Come on! Let's go over to this here Samer place and see what we're slated for."

We rolled our packs, hopped a passin' lorry, and landed in Samer in time to answer mess call for dinner.

This shavey which our lieut had called Marquand had his office in a warehouse down near the railroad tracks not far from the *mairie*, and out in a little orchard behind it these Chemical Warfare boys had set up a spiffy camp. They was strong on regulations, and the squad tents was laid out just so, neat as a old maid's boudoir. Them boys was out to win the war—you could tell that without half lookin'—and the way they snapped into squads east and west, even when goin' to mess, would 'a' put a combat unit on perpetual fatigue duty.

Finally we drifted over all set to hear the bad news, and ten minutes later we was hung onto the craziest detail that was ever organized in that man's army.

Lieutenant Marquand gazes over our papers and then proceeds to give us the once-over. He's a well setup gazabo, carryin' around with him a sort of a grin that has us doin' the same thing even though we don't have an idea what it's all about. He sizes us up both ways from the jack and then tells us to take a seat.

"You three men," he began, doin' his best to cover up his grin, "come to me highly recommended for special service, the nature of which I will acquaint you with in a few minutes. Your commanding officer at Candas and I were talking the other day and I was telling him about some unusual work that I must have done within the next few days, and he informed me that he had the very men I wanted, so we put your transfers through.

"Now, I will explain the nature of this detail in which you three men will be exclusively engaged for the next three days. From time to time you may be called on to do the same sort of work as long as the necessity arises. We are a unit of the Chemical Warfare Service, and it might as well be known now that, although we are supposed to do a special work here, we are not equipped for it. The work of this unit consists largely in testing the drinking water wherever the division is quartered, and we are supposed to have chemicals with which to do this. The only chemical we have is chlorinated lime which helps to purify the water, but does not tell us whether or not the spring or well has been poisoned.

"In order to get a certain test of the water we have found it necessary to use an old but simple method. We take a sample of the water, give it to a cat and watch the results. But we have no cats, and that is your job—procuring for us the necessary number of cats to make the tests when the division moves up the lines in a couple of weeks. The S.O.S. should furnish these cats, and I have put in a requisition for them, but it would be foolish to expect them to come through on time. Six months from now I will probably receive a thousand cats, but I need twenty-five right now. As an incentive to you, I have arranged that if the twenty-five cats are secured by next Saturday afternoon, you three men will receive a ten day pass to Paris. This is Wednesday. That gives you three days."

Sweet spirits of nitre! That was what we had been lookin' for ever since we'd hit the lines. If there was twenty-five cats in that country they might as well come in and surrender, because with a pass to Paris hingin' on the issue they wouldn't have no more chance than a Mexican hairless pup on a polar expedition.

"You might as well know also," continues the lieut, "that cats are getting rather scarce over here. Other units have been gathering in the strays until it is almost impossible to keep them in sufficient quantities. We have used rabbits, but there seems to be no more to be had. Now you men have *carte blanche*—get them any way you can, but *get* them. And luck to you!" He turned back to his work and we trooped outside holdin' our breath. With one accord we stopped at the end of the company street.

"KITTY! Kitty! Kitty!" calls Little Abe as if he expected them twenty-five cats to march up in company formation and surrender unconditionally.

"Pass to Paris!" whistles Buck, voicin' the thing that was keepin' me plum interested in the business before us. "And all that stands betwixt us and it is twenty-five tom cats and their better-halves. Let's go!"

"How do you catch cats anyhow?" I wants to know, tryin' to figure out a plan of campaign. I had a hunch we was stackin' up ag'inst somethin' with a catch in it—besides the cat catchin'.

"There's somethin' they call cat-nip," opines Buck, reachin' for his sack of smokin'. "Mebbe we can work somethin' outta that."

"We'll get a dog and let him do the work for us," suggests Little Abe hopefully.

"Dead cats ain't in the contract," I points out. "They've got to be alive so's they can taste that water."

It was Buck who had the brilliant idea this time. Usually it was Little Abe, him bein' full of ideas most of the time, and nine out of ten of them of 'em havin' a kick-back that landed us in the brig or put us on some sort of a fatigue detail for a couple of weeks. Me and Buck had spent more time tryin' to help Abe get us all out of trouble than we did winnin' the war anyhow. But I'm forgettin' Buck's bright idea.

"The answer," says Buck, drawin' a deep inhale, "is fish."

"Oh, I see," says Abe sarcastic. "Catfish? I didn't know they would catch cats."

"Ever' day is Friday as far as cats is concerned," Buck explains. "We'll get some fish, put 'em in the back end of the truck, let 'em get ripe, then back up in some alley and hold the sack open."

Me and Abe both saw the light pronto, and the more I thought about that plan the more I figgered it would work. Buck's head was good for somethin' besides balancin' a cocky overseas cap and causin' them m'amselles in the *vin* shops even to forget how to shortchange you. He evermore could make love to 'em—as long as they kept the bubble water down to five francs a bottle.

Havin' convinced Little Abe that Buck's plan was a cat-getter, we got busy and located our flivver truck. Abe confiscated an old chicken coop made out of slats, and we patched it up and loaded it on the rear. Lieutenant Marquand furnished us with another long crate to deposit our daily catch in, and he suggested that we keep it in our squad tent at the end of company street. I had a sneakin' idea they was somethin' back of that grin of his when he said that, but I didn't get the full benefit of what it was until I tried to sleep in that tent with a half a crate full of tom cats, each one singin' the "Jailhouse Blues" in a different key simultaneous. But that's gettin' too far ahead.

Along late that afternoon we located what we was lookin' for. An old frog fisherman down on the river was also the proprietor of a little fish shop that made me wish I had brought my gas mask along with me. For ten francs we bought half a keg of fish which was beginnin' to get mellow, and while I was dickerin' with that old bunch of chin-whiskers, Buck slipped cat No. 1, which was asleep in the window, under his coat and ducked.

That night me and Buck and Abe sat in a blackjack game and cleaned up a flock of francs which we knew we was goin' to need when we got to Paris. That outfit had just been paid off and there was *beaucoup* francs all around us. We thinned 'em down some and then headed for our tent, stoppin' by the truck to see that all was well with our fish. I'll say it was! We caught three more cats, and another one got away, makin' four on hand before we had even got started.

Early the next mornin' we got down to the business of earnin' that pass to Paris. Huh! Before we got through we had earned an honorable discharge, and the Cross of the Legion of Honor. Only that wasn't what we got.

We had to drive that flivver at top speed all the time, almost runnin' over a couple of kids and a woman, in order to keep out of reach of the smell of that keg in the rear. After a little investigatin' we found a alley down near the railroad that looked promisin' and we backed up into it.

Our cat trap was simple, consistin' of a small tarpaulin spread over the uprights, and nailed to the truck bed on each side. The rear curtain we just kept raised, figgerin' on droppin' and holdin' it down when one of our victims got inside and then one of us was to crawl inside and sack him. With evr'thing all set we backed off for a hundred feet or so and awaited developments.

IN ABOUT ten minutes I saw the first tabby wander on the scene. She came through a hole under the fence, took one sniff of the atmosphere, and made a dash for the truck. By the time she got her head into that keg, Abe had her by the other end, and before she knew what was happenin' she was lookin' through the bars, plum lonesome and puzzled.

We took it turn about goin' into the truck after 'em, and it was just my luck to draw a one-eyed, Bolshevik, fightin' fool. What I mean, he had carvin' tools that was meant for business ever' day, and he ripped me up high, wide and handsome before I could turn loose. Finally I smothered him with my tunic and dumped him inside with the others.

But we had another bad actor in that coop, a sort of a burnt brown brindle which squared off to old one-eyed Cyclops, and for about three rounds it was the niftiest scrap I ever saw. Abe was bettin' on old Cyclops, only he named him Von Hindenburg, and Buck was backin' the brindle, callin' him Foch. I held the stakes and acted as referee, but the fight was a draw, each one backin' into a neutral corner and refusin' to come out. But 'twas easy to see that the truce between 'em was liable to be busted any minute.

When we figgered that 'twasn't no use in stickin' around that alley any more, we counted noses and found that we had nabbed seven in less than an hour's time.

"Seven—come eleven, countin' the four we've got at home," says Abe. "If we keep this up, we won't need but a couple of days to corral the whole business."

But Abe was countin' his pullets too early. In the next three hours we visted four fine lookin' alleys, and we just caught three more cats. We got more that afternoon, and when it got dark—the time when they always took their promenades—we didn't see hide nor hair of one. Which brought us to the sad conclusion that that was all there was—there wasn't no more. But we had fifteen—ten to go. Not so bad, eh!"

Little Abe fished out his old chuck-a-luck board that night and we was gettin' ready to call on the C.W.S. boys again and see if we couldn't separate 'em from a few more soap wrappers for our trip to Paris, but there was two or three things that made us change our minds about that and decide to keep the home fires burnin' that night.

First place, if you'd stick your head outside the tent you could hear women and kids in five-six directions callin' their cats to come home to supper, and some of our little pets started to answer in a mournful yowl. Then too, old Von Hindenburg and Foch called off their truce and locked horns for another bout which wasn't my idea of a peaceful occasion.

I sashayed out to the kitchen and borrowed a hunk of mutton off the cook, and with this we sort of eased 'em off temporarily. Tryin' to chaperone fifteen cats in the same coop, all of 'em havin' different ideas at the same time, wasn't my idea of a soft snap nohow. All told we was as busy as a one-armed paper-hanger with a flea under his shirt.

Just before taps was sounded Lieutenant Marquand paid us a visit at the tent, and he was tickled pink when he saw our lineup of felonious misdemeanors, each of 'em lookin' mad enough to spit in a bulldog's eye. The louie informs us that the passes will be signed by Major McAlpin on the follo win' Sunday mornin', provided we got the cats. The major had promised to be on hand about ten o'clock to inspect our catch, and then we'd have to deliver them to headquarters, so that they could be shipped up to the front with the rest of the division's equipment.

"That gives you tomorrow and next day," continues the lieut, "to get the other ten, but from the looks of things I'd say you won't have need of that much time. But you get the cats ready and I'll see that you get your passes in time to catch the Sunday afternoon express for Paris."

"Sir!" butts in Little Abe. "Do we have to have twenty-five? Cats are gettin' scarcer than pet skunks around here."

"Those are the major's orders," replies the lieut, grinnin'. "You'll have to make it twenty-five."

We drew straws to see who was goin' to mount guard over them cats that night, to keep Von Hindenburg and Foch from disturbin' the peace and dignity of the community, and Little Abe was it. They must 'a' give a lot of trouble that night because the next mornin' he was as sore as a couple of pups and only one bone between 'em. I know I heard a couple of ruckuses before I got off to sleep, and I don't know how many happened after that.

Buck buttonholes a truck driver the next mornin' after breakfast and gets from him the information that there is a smaller town some three-four kilometers down the river, and we decide to see what luck we could have there. So Abe backed the flivver up to rear of our tent and we loaded the cats aboard and took 'em with us, bein' sort of leery of leavin' 'em in camp with all fifteen of them ex-owners on the still hunt. That flivver was carryin' its full tonnage when we got cats, fish keg, ourselves and ever'-thing else on it, and the engine was spittin' like old Von Hindy, hisself, when we hit this little village.

By this time the fish was givin' off a smell that wasn't anyways close to bein' perfume, and when stopped in the *Place de Victoire* there was three cats trailin' us like we was that pie-eyed piper I ust to read about when I was in school. We tolled 'em off into a alley and brought 'em into the fold, and late that afternoon when we had cleaned that burg by a house-to-house canvass, we had eight more which brought our total up to twenty-three. Only two to go, and a whole day to do it in! Boy, we all shook hands and split a bottle of Triple Sec in celebration of victory. But we was rakin' in the pot before the showdown.

On arrivin' back at Samar we found that old Von Hindy had just about put one of the newcomers *hors de combat*, but we got him out, painted him with iodine and marked him "duty" anyhow. Finally he come around all right, and then me and Buck matched to see who was it that night. I won, but I didn't win much because that danged chorus kept me awake too. They'd had enough of each other's company and they was tellin' the world about it. How them ex-owners didn't hear that bedlam I ain't yet been able to understand! Buck doggone near smothered 'em to death coverin' 'em up with blankets, tryin' to muffle 'em down, but all the good that done was to make 'em madder.

SEEMS like I hadn't more'n closed my eyes until Foch and old Von Hindy hit the high C of a steam calliope with a busted boiler simultaneous and them other battles they'd been havin' wasn't nothin' but love-taps compared to the mixup that followed. When we got 'em separated at last, and got Foch outside, we decided to build an addition on to the coop for him, which we did, and reveille sounded before we got the job finished. By that time I'd had enough of them danged cats to last me for the rest of my natural life. Little Abe expressed my feelin's exactly.

"I wish I was a through freight," he said viciously, "and ever' dam one of them cats was glued to the rails."

That morning' after breakfast when we went out to the flivver that keg of fish was too far gone for us to associate with it any longer.

"Let's put it in the cage with the cats," suggested Buck, "and chloroform 'em for a while."

"But we've got to keep them cats company," I objects, "and they're bad enough as is."

But we just had to get rid of them fish some way or the other and not lose any time about it. Finally we had to use our gas masks to get 'em down to the river and dump 'em in. Next thing we do is to call on Whiskers who kept the fish shop, but he was out of fish—not even a smell left. That had us worried some, but there ain't nothin' to do but go cat huntin' without bait.

We leave Buck in charge of the cats, and me and Abe spend the rest of the day chasin' around over the country in ever' direction, keepin' both eyes peeled for anything that looked like a cat, but it wasn't a good day for cats—if there was any left, which I doubt. We scouted around ever' farm in a radius of ten kilometers, and Abe crawled into a couple of barns, and even took a sneak into a kitchen when we saw the old lady leave the house. But nothin' doin' in the cat line—not so, Horatio!

Givin' it up as a bad job along about two o'clock that afternoon, we headed back for camp and when we locate Buck, feedin' slumgullion to the cats, he looks up full of questions.

"Did you get one?"

Me and Abe shakes our heads sadly.

"Well, out you go again," he orders, wavin' his dixie of slum toward the door. "We've got to have one more."

"One? You mean two," I corrects him.

"I mean one cat," he states, holdin' up one finger. "While you two birds was out at some *vin* shop swillin' cognac—"

"We ain't had a drop," denies Little Abe truthfully.

"While you was swillin' cognac," he goes on, "this here specimen right here comes wanderin' into the tent—just beggin' to join the army." He points at a blue tom with a ribbon on his neck. "I signed him up for the duration of the war, and he thinks he's the top-kick already. Just watch him strut his stuff!"

That lad was proud of hisself, but I noticed that he didn't strut in range of them high-powered carvin' tools of Von Hindy's.

"I've got an idea," says Little Abe some few minutes later.

"Another one?" Buck throws up both hands.

"Let's load up these twenty-four melodious mishaps," goes on Abe, "and *cache* 'em out in the woods somewhere so's they'll be safe and won't disturb us. I spotted a place today where they'll never be found."

Rather than spend another night in that cataclysm we fell in with Abe's idea right then, and an hour later we had sneaked 'em out in the flivver and covered 'em up in the woods five kilometers from town—as safe as if they had been in their little trundle beds at home. Then we hit the breeze back to town to get that one baby that was beginnin' to loom between us and that pass to Paris as big as Washington's monument.

We parked the car and started out, ready to back any kind of a play necessary to get that one Maltese. There wasn't no two ways about it—we just had to have that cat. 'Twas gettin' along about three o'clock in the afternoon, and by four we had come to the conclusion that there wasn't a kitten left in the burg. Meantime we had noticed that the women was doin' a lot of talkin' over the back fences, and that squads of kids was wanderin' about lookin' for somethin', and we didn't have no trouble readin' signs that pointed toward some interestin' developments with the chances in favor of us hoggin' the spotlight, which we wasn't overly anxious to do.

One by one I saw my hopes of that Paris pass go glimmerin' in the distance, and a cat would have looked like a long lost brother to us just then. Full of gloom and plum disconsolate we loafed down to the *gare* about the time the Rouen train came in, and from one of them long, de luxe coaches stepped about three yards of pink organdie wrapped around ninety pounds of dainty loveliness which took my breath away. Talk about your visions of beauty—she had 'em all skinned to a synopsis of the foregoing chapters.

When she floated out to the ground she was holding tight to a long red ribbon, and with it she hauled out one of these pink-eyed, bow-legged, shaggy-haired poodle pups about as big as a dollar and eighty-five cents in change.

"Hot damn!" yelps Abe. "There's our cat."

"Tain't a cat," says Buck. "It's a dog."

"I ain't talkin' about the poodle. Look what she's got in her arms!" Abe makes a dive in that direction, but I got him by the arm and held him back.

One more look showed me that what I'd taken for a muff or a fur or somethin' she was carryin', was a cat after all—one of these fluff-tailed, sleepy-eyed Maltese prize winners. Man! That cat looked good to me, but you couldn't walk up to an angel like that and say, "*Bon jour, m'selle!* Give me your cat." It was goin' to require some diplomacy and tact, and mebbe some burglary. I wasn't plum sure.

Anyway we trailed along behind her as she made her way to the street where she was met by the mayor of the burg and his wife.

The vision was the mayor's daughter, and her name was Yvette. She had been away on a visit for a month or two to Rouen, so madame, who ran the *vin* shop, said as she rolled her eyes and clicked her tongue and finally made us compree that Yvette was engaged and that she was goin' to be married as soon as her *sous lieutenant* got his leave of absence.

That wasn't what was worryin' me and Buck and Abe, but we let her think whatever she wanted to think, because we wasn't sayin' much about cats right then. There was too many people lookin' for one. But before we left madame told us that the dog's name was Napoleon and the cat's name was Josephine. Followin' which we foregathered in our tent and tried to dope out some plan of action. It was that Maltese, or lose a ten day pass to Paris. You can figger it out for yourself, but we wasn't entertainin' much sympathy for Yvette's Josephine.

We saw right now that we was up ag'inst a stiff proposition. If it had been one of them ordinary residences we could 'a' managed, but the *mairie* in one of them French towns is just about the biggest show on the boards. This one was both a home and a office for his nibs, and 'twas guarded by one of our M.P.'s, and a one-armed policeman—gendarme, I think they called him—and 'twasn't no upholstered cinch to get into it and walk out with a prize cat without bein' questioned.

I was sort of mullin' over a plan of one of us callin' on Yvette and welcomin' her back to Samer in behalf of the A.E.F., but havin' had a little experience with what happens to a amorous young swain when he goes a-wooin' his charmer in that country, I wasn't pepped up much over the idea. What could any of us do with *mamman* supervisin' the deal? And mebbe a couple of maiden aunts and a governess thrown in to boot? I never could see how them boys ever got any satisfactory courtin' done.

AFTER we'd been wrestlin' with the situation for a while and gettin' nowhere with it, Abe has one of his bright ideas. I'm leery of it right off the bat, just because I'd hit the loops a couple times while carryin' out one of his plans. But he kept on enlargin' on his plan and at last he convinced me and Buck that it might work, although it was loaded with dynamite and we knew it. 'Twas like this:

Them towns over there along behind the Somme front was filled with refugees from up Belgium way, and none of the French had any use for 'em—had a suspicion that they was German spies. I ain't sayin' whether they was or wasn't, but some mighty strange things did happen, and ever'body sort of eyed 'em sidewise most of the time. Abe's plan was to sashay right up to the M.P. on duty in front of the *mairie*, actin' plum excited and mysterious, and tell him we're on the trail of a German spy, and that we saw him slip into the *mairie* through a window.

"To make it sound more reasonable," explains Abe, "we'll say that we've been watchin' one of these refugees for a few days and that last night we caught him out behind the church signalin' with a flashlight when that night bomber was over. Then when we tell the M.P. that we saw the same bird crawlin' through a window into the *mairie*, he's goin' to search that place from one end to the other. We volunteer to help him, see? If we can't kidnap Josephine in all that excitement then we don't deserve no passes to Paris."

After some more argument and deliberation, we adopted Abe's plan unanimously, and decided not to lose no time doin' it. Havin' been on special service we had exchanged our rifles for .45 automatics, and we loaded 'em up and headed straight for the *mairie*. Abe took the lead, and he pulled his stuff in big league style. Why, before he was half way through tellin' that M.P. about it I was believin' it myself.

Did we get away with it? I'll say so, Horatio! What I mean, by the time Abe had finished his little tale, that M.P. was tootin' plum frantic on his little whistle, and a minute later his buddy arrived from somewhere in a hurry.

Without even knockin' at the door we all busts headlong inside and runs in the direction of that part of the house where Abe said the spy entered: The mayor's secretary, an undersized runt wearin' a skull cap and a pair of glasses, met us in the doorway of the offices and tried to stop us, but the M.P. stiff-armed him out of the way and bumped right into *M'sieu le Maire*, hisself. About two words are enough for him and he grabs up his official sword and leads the charge.

The first room we popped into must 'a' been the livin' room, for Yvette and *mamman* was there lookin' at some folderols that Yvette must 'a' brought with her. Papa explodes a couple of charges of French, and *mamman* dives into his arms prompt. Yvette begins runnin' around and around in circles callin' for Napoleon and Josephine. They was both under her feet, but she was scared so bad she couldn't see 'em.

Finally she cornered 'em both and hugs one under each arm so tight that they let out a few howls which adds to the general confusion. About then Buck winks at me and heads through the door on the right. I gives Abe the high sign to stick with Josephine.

"This way!" yelps Buck, and the rest of us crowd along behind him, me sort of ridin' herd on *mamman* and *M'sieu le Maire*, and pushin' 'em on ahead of me. That room was empty, but there was another one joinin' it, and Buck and the M.P. make a thorough search of both of 'em, but don't find nothin'. *Mamman*, papa and me sort of bring up the rear guard, and just about the time we was beginnin' to figger that the spy had escaped, Little Abe bangs loose with his forty-five back in the livin' room.

Mamman screams, and the rest of us jump about six feet straight up—includin' me and Buck because that part of it wasn't in the program. We all try to crowd through the door at the same time, and when I squeezed inside one glance was enough to tell me all I wanted to know. Yvette had fainted in a low, deep chair, and Napoleon was sittin' on the arm of it tryin' to lick her face. Little Abe was bendin' over Yvette with his back to us—Josephine was nowhere in sight.

"He went through that open window," yells Abe without turnin' around. "I think I hit him. Come on! Le's head him off." He ducked out into the hall ahead of the rest of us.

As I passed Yvette I saw her eyelids flutter, and then *mamman* swooped down on her. Slammin' the door behind me I joined the gang in their helter-skelter search, ever'body runnin' in all directions at the same time, but the spy had departed. So had Little Abe.

After a little me and Buck slips away and when we locates Little Abe he has the flivver all tuned up ready to go. Beside him on the front seat is a gunny sack with the end tied up.

"Josephine?" asks Buck, climbin' in beside him.

"Herself," replies Abe with a grin. "Worked sweet, didn't it? You two palookas can thank me for this trip to Paris."

"In a hurry to get her out of town, ain't you?" queries Buck.

Abe nods. "I've got a hunch we ain't heard the last of Josephine, and I'm not takin' any chances."

And mebbe Abe didn't call the turn there! We didn't know then just how big a mouthful he did speak.

When we turned Josephine loose among all them other twenty-four plebeian cats, we sort of expected her to draw the social lines. But not so, Horatio! Josephine was a democrat. It was the first time she had ever been allowed to associate with the lower classes, and she made friends fast, even rubbin' noses with old Von Hindy, hisself, without so much as gettin' a scratch. We fed 'em some liver Abe had got from somewhere and went back to town.

Just before mess call that night we dropped around to see Lieut. Marquand, and he's in his office all by hisself. He looks up with a grin when we come to 'tention.

"How many?" he asks.

"Twenty-five," says me and Buck and Abe.

"Good business!" he approves. "Your lieutenant was right when he said you three could get them if they could be gotten. Have any trouble?"

"Some," admits Abe, and me and Buck nods.

"Have you got them in a safe place tonight?"

"They'll be on hand at ten o'clock in the mornin'," promises Buck, "or we'll know the reason why."

"That's up to you, of course." He turns toward the door. "I'll bring the major around in the morning, and I'm arranging for one of our regular trucks to take your cats away from here as soon as Major McAlpin inspects them. I'll have him sign your passes then and your job will be over."

Man, that was good news! Keepin' school with twenty-five unruly growlers while their owners was lookin' for 'em, includin' the mayor and the police, was sort of like sittin' on a keg of dynamite, and we was honin' to be in Paris when the explosion come off.

After supper me and Buck and Little Abe sort of saunters out in the orchard back of the camp and set down on rock wall. I was a little worried about them cats 'way out there in the woods all by theirselves. Not that I give a darn how lonely they get, but I was scared somethin' might happen to one of 'em. If old Von Hindy decided to go on a rampage and Josephine got in the way, we'd be shy a cat. Then, too, the wall between him and Foch was sort of flimsy, and two cats with dispositions like they owned—well, most anything could and most probably would take place.

Buck, he's been thinkin' along the same lines.

"What do you say to goin' out there and kinda keepin' an eye on 'em tonight, Abe?" he suggests.

"Sanitary Ann with me." Abe's French didn't have much French about it. He was tryin' to say, "*s'on fait rien.*"

Loadin' up with a blanket and a bottle of benedictine each to sort of prime ourselves for the joys of Paris, we drove out to the woods. Ever'thing was quiet along the Potomac, and after seein' that Foch, Von Hindy and Josephine was all in their proper places we rolled up in the bed of the flivver which wasn't such a bad bunk if it hadn't had a fish hangover.

But all that trouble went for nothin' because the night was as peaceful as you please, and ever'thing was runnin' joyous and merry when we got up. All the cats was in good spirits, and even old Von Hindy seemed to be in a pleasant frame of mind. But we didn't put much trust in him, and we kept Foch in his own little bailiwick. Then we got back to the camp and slipped 'em in our tent before breakfast without anybody knowin' anything about it.

I'M WILLIN' to take oath that the two hours between seven-thirty that mornin' and nine-thirty was the longest on record. Most of the time me and Buck and Abe was sittin' on them darned cats prayin'. In the first place the whole bloomin' town was gettin' plum excited about somethin', and gangs of men, women and children was standin' around on the streets, and most of 'em was lookin' straight at me and Buck and Abe ever' time we showed up. There was somethin' in the air and we knew it, and the excitement seemed to spread among the cats which got restless and began to let out a few plaintive yowls ever' onct in a while. We covered the crate with blankets about six deep in order to smother the sound, but there was nothin' doin'. Not so, Horatio!

Along about nine-thirty there was a stir in the streets and ever'body moved off in the direction of the *mairie*. Me and Buck and Abe meandered along behind to see what's what, and just then a limousine rolled up to the front door of the *mairie* and out popped a generalissimo or somethin' wearin' a red cap, and followed by a couple of spiffy aides.

"Hell's bells!" gasped Buck. "We're in for it now—six months in the brig anyhow."

"Was that old—?" Abe was starin' with his mouth open.

"T.N.T. hisself," whispers Buck. "I'd know them bow-legs anywhere."

There wasn't but one T.N.T. in the A.E.F., and that was more than plenty. Colonel Gervis, his name was, and he was provost marshal of that sector—the high-muckety-muck of all creation. Whenever he marred the beauty of the horizon even the shaveys sat up and apologized for livin'. He could cuss for thirty minutes without stoppin' to get his breath, and never use the same cuss-word twict, and he counted that day as lost when he couldn't have some poor devil court martialed.

It wasn't more'n five minutes later when he busted out of the *mairie*, hittin' on all eight cylinders, and with him came *M'sieu le Maire*, *mamman*, Yvette and Napoleon, not to mention the aides, a couple of M.Ps. and the secretary, and the whole population of that burg fell in behind on the parade to Lieutenant Marquand's office. The lieut saw 'em comin' and he met 'em on the porch because he knew they couldn't half of 'em get inside. With him was a major—the one who *was* to have signed our passes.

Me and Buck and Abe beat it back into our tent and sort of looked at each other without havin' anything to say. There wasn't no tellin' what was comin', but there was one thing certain, it was on its way. All I wanted then was a earthquake to come along and swallow up them damn cats, crates and all. But 'twas too late to do anything but hope, so we sort of grinned at each other and drifted out toward the office to hear the verdict.

The parade halted before the porch and old T.N.T. returned the lieutenant's salute in a snappy manner.

"Lieutenant," he calls in stentorian tones, "a complaint has reached me this morning from the mayor, here, that all the cats in this town have mysteriously disappeared. Suspicion points toward your men. Now, I know of no earthly use they can have for these cats, but if they need them, the Service of Supplies will procure them. I am starting an investigation and I want a squad of your men to search this camp and the surrounding country. And I promise you that if I find that this outrage has been perpetrated by your men, they will receive the most severe punishment a court martial can mete out under the circumstances. It won't be light."

The lieut saluted and called in his top kicker to get the squad ready. The mayor looked pleased and began talkin' to T.N.T., and so did about a dozen others, all at the same time. Yvette, with Napoleon in her arms, floats up to him, and timidly caught his coat sleeve. The smile he give her was enough to make Napoleon bite him, but mebbe it was beneath his dignity.

"My heart—she is bleed', m'sieur," sobbed Yvette with a cute little smile through her tears, and she had old T.N.T. hangin' on to the ropes for breath. Man! who wouldn't 'a' been. With one like that she could 'a' got anything she wanted out of me—except Josephine.

"*Pauvre* Napoleon!" She fondled the poodle pup lovin'ly. "He is desolate' for hees Josephine. He ees so lonely—like Yvette. Please, *m'sieur*, bring to me my *pauvre* Josephine." She gave ze beeg, b-r-rave mans a come-hither look and as far as he was concerned it was all over but the linen shower. His chest expanded full six inches.

"Your poor Josephine shall be returned to you," he promised in bum French, somethin' like Abe's, only more so.

"*Merci! Merci, m'sieur!*" She gave his hand a squeeze.

"Lieutenant," he barks, "is my detail ready?"

Me and Buck and Abe didn't wait for no more. I think they had the idea of duckin' for tall timber, but that wouldn't 'a' done any good. They'd 'a' picked us up before we got started, so I sort of herded them into the tent. Right then I got an inspiration.

"Abe," I hollers, "crawl under them blankets on the cat crate. You're a sick man."

"So damn near it they ain't no fun in it," admits Abe dolefully, and then he catches the big idea. "Sick, am I? What've I got?" he wants to know, pullin' the blankets up around his chin.

"How the devil do I know?" says I, tryin' to think. "What do you feel like you've got?"

"Cat-arrh," suggests Buck with a snort.

"That ain't catchin'," I objects.

"Hell it ain't!" grunts Little Abe. "Just wait and see."

"You've got scarlet fever," I decides at last. "That's enough to keep 'em out. Turn your face to wall, and if you know any prayers say 'em."

"Three beans," agrees Abe, meanin' *tres bien*.

WHEN we got Abe all fixed up Buck grabs a rifle, fixes the bayonet, and takes up his position in front of the tent, lookin' straight in front. In the meantime I'm busy rehearsin' my little speech. Boy! Talk about your inspirations! I was proud of myself. It couldn't help but work. We'd been in tight places before that, but this was goin' to be the closest escape on record.

I takes a peep outside and the parade has started down company street. In front come the squad of eight bucks, pokin' into each tent, and just behind 'em prances T.N.T. with Yvette clingin' to his arm like she had all she was ever goin' to want in this world and didn't have no idea of turnin' it loose. Bunched in the rear was Lieutenant Marquand, the major, *mamman*, papa, the aides, and the population of the burg.

"They ain't searchin' the tents much," says Buck through tight lips. "Mebbe we've got a buddy or two on that squad or the lieut has had time to tip 'em off."

"Don't you worry, Big Boy," I comes back. "This is goin' to be a knockout."

By this time the searchin' party was just two or three tents down the street, and things was comin' to a quick showdown. I sort of braced myself to pull the stunt in the way it ought to be pulled and Abe practiced a couple of low groans which sounded a whole lot like the real thing. But just then I saw somethin' outside the tent that brought my heart up in my throat. Napoleon had jerked loose from his mistress and was doin' a little investigatin' on his own hook.

He stopped out about ten feet away and lifted his head, sniffin' in our direction. I'm tellin' you the truth when I say I saw him recognize the scent of his little pal and playmate, Josephine. He began to get all excited and started to wigglin' like a worm on a hot rock. Me and Buck just froze up, but Abe, havin' his back to the door, didn't know what was happenin'.

With an eager little yipe Napoleon charges straight toward us and as he passes Buck he gets a swift kick properly placed which brings a loud yelp of pained surprise out of him. But that don't stop Napoleon. Not so, Horatio! Napoleon was made of sterner stuff. A couple of jumps brings him to Abe's sick bed where he turns loose a volley of joyous yelps. Josephine recognizes him and meows a happy welcome.

"What the hell?" gasps Abe, turnin' over.

"Scat!" I hisses in a low tone. "Scat, dang you! Scat!"

"Get the hell outta here," begs Abe, shakin' the blankets at him. "Pulverize it, Herb," he pleads, lookin' at me.

One fleetin' glance outside showed me that I had less than twenty seconds to do somethin' in, and I done it. With a flyin' tackle I throttled Napoleon, and turned off the yelps. Then I looked for some place to put him, but there wasn't any. Ten seconds more and old T.N.T. would be there!

"Pop him in the cat crate," whispers Abe, throwin' back the blankets, and the next instant I dumps him in with his beloved Josephine, Von Hindy and the rest, and straightened and started toward the flap. Before I'd taken two steps the squad appeared in the door where Buck blocked their entry. Over their shoulders I saw old T.N.T. and Yvette peerin' inside.

"Sir!" I salutes him fancy. "The doctor has ordered us to let no one in this tent until he can get an ambulance here and take this man to the hospital. He has scarlet fever and the tent is quarantined."

They all stepped back a little, and the squad turned to T.N.T. for orders. For a full minute I held my breath, and then I saw that it was goin' to work. He backed away a couple more steps, and in two more seconds it would have been all over but the shoutin', but just as I was drawin' in a deep breath of relief, all hell busted loose.

Talk about riots! Man! A barrage of Jack Johnsons on a quiet sector would have sounded like the echo of a whisper beside what happened durin' the next few minutes.

At first I thought old Von Hindy and Foch had got together ag'in. There busted out a medley of unearthly howls and squalls, and about then I heard a couple of keen, agonized yowls which I recognized as comin' from Napoleon, and they sounded like he wanted nothin' so much as a clear path to St. Helena. He had met his Waterloo, and he wasn't hesitatin' to announce that fact. The ruckus brought the whole parade in on top of us, scarlet fever or no scarlet fever.

I reckon Little Abe saw that the jig was up, and 'twasn't no use in groanin' any more. Anyhow he leaped out of that bunk and jerked the blankets off the crate with a joyous whoop. Me and Buck got there as quick as he did and what I saw brought unholy joy—makin' up for the loss of them Paris passes.

"Hot damn!" yelps Abe. "Eat him up, Von Hindy! Eat him up! Nothin' else would do him but he must get in there. Eat him up! Atta boy! Another rip like that and all he'll ever need will be a hole in the ground and somebody to cover him up. Take your medicine, Napoleon. You was cryin' for it. Hot dawg!"

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Lieutenant Marquand laughin' like he was goin' to bust—behind T.N.T.'s back, and Yvette was doin' a Charleston all over the place, beggin' old T.N.T. to save her Napoleon as well as Josephine. About that time Foch broke loose and joined forces with Von Hindy, and if T.N.T. hadn't turned the crate over and give Napoleon a chance they'd 'a' had to gather up his remains in a dust-pan. But Napoleon took his chance and disappeared so fast I never even saw which way he went.

Ever'body went after his particular cat, leavin' just a few of us to hear old T.N.T.'s explosion, and when the air cleared me and Buck and Abe was in the brig, starin' a court martial in the face.

That night about taps Lieutenant Marquand comes over and pays us a little visit.

"Boys," says he, hidin' a grin, "your transfer to this outfit was merely a loan—thank God. Colonel Gervis ordered a court martial, but before we could call it, the division will move to another sector, out of his jurisdiction. We'll bluff him out some way or other because I got you into this and I'm going to get you out. In the meantime there's a truck waiting to take you back to Candas. I'm sorry about those passes to Paris. You deserved them."

"That's all right, sir," says Abe. "We got our money's worth out of Napoleon."

"I may want to borrow you for this work again sometime," he says with a chuckle.

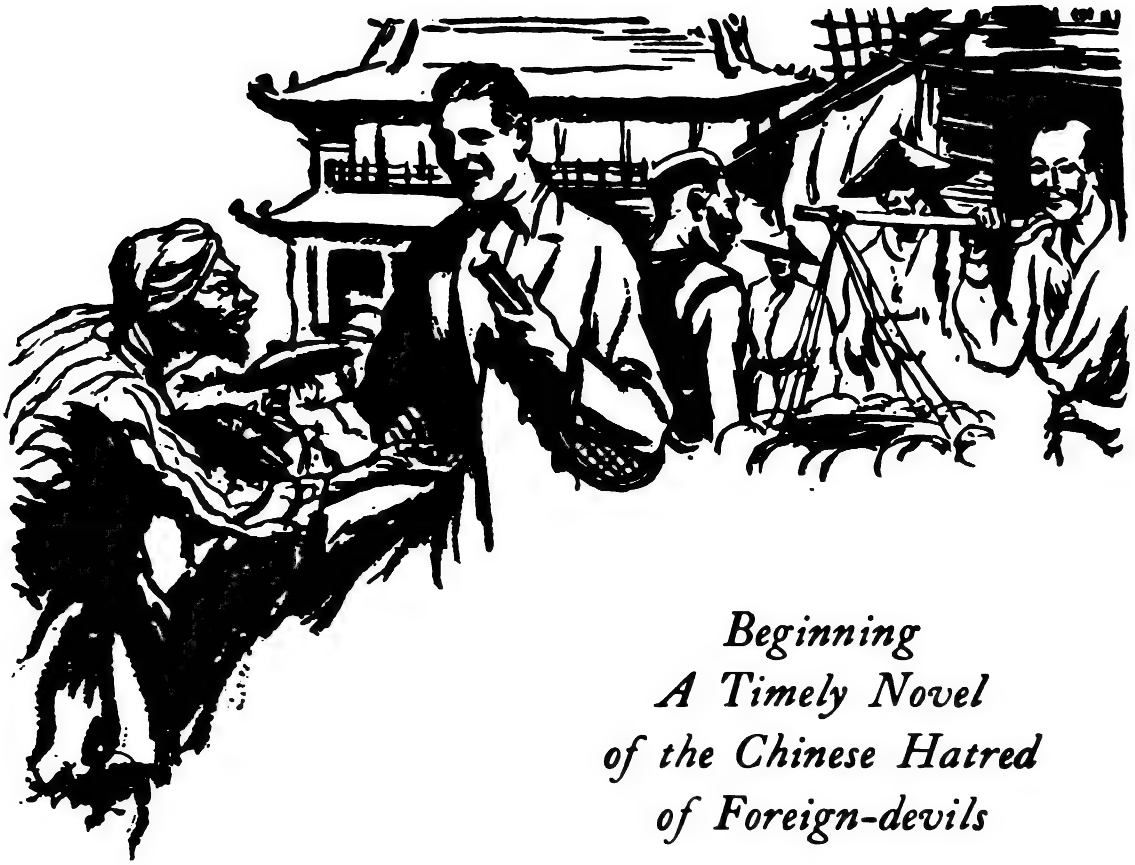
"Yes, sir," replies Abe respectful. "But will you do us a favor?"

"Of course."

"Then give us a warnin' twenty-four hours in advance next time."

"I'll do that," he promises.

"Three beans!" says me and Buck and Abe.



Beginning
A Timely Novel
of the Chinese Hatred
of Foreign-devils

CHAPTER I

THE SILVER SHOE

WO HUNG, a beggar, sat at the Hatamen Gate, which is at the end of the main street of Pekin. He was old and poor, and he was starving, for he suffered from *beri-beri*, a disease that had made him so weak that it was impossible for him to work.

He had seated himself upon a low stone parapet upon the bridge across the moat, from which he could survey the waste land under the wall that divides the Tartar from the Chinese City.

In a pitiful voice he cried out for alms, moaning as beggars will. But, though hundreds passed him by, no one took any notice of him. Though charity is one of the virtues most highly praised by Confucius, no one paid any heed to the plaintive voice of Wo Hung.

"Give alms!" he cried. "Show pity to a pauper, or this night, I die!"

This was not altogether true; for Wo Hung was a well-known figure at the Hatamen Gate, and he was known to have used these same words, day after day, for many months. However, he was certainly ill. He had not tasted rice for three days. For a whole week he had eaten nothing but a crust of buckwheat cake and the rind of a watermelon.

It was mid-summer; and as the afternoon advanced, the voice of Wo Hung grew weaker and weaker, until his chin dropped upon his shrunken chest, and his thin arms hung listlessly at his sides. He was fast asleep.

The traffic streamed through the gate: half-naked, broad-chested coolies, carrying great bales of vegetable produce slung upon bamboo poles; hawkers wheeling their barrows; fat, prosperous merchants in rickshaws; mandarins in Pekin carts; laughing, dirty children, and now and again, a European or a Japanese from the Legation Quarter near at hand.

Suddenly, Wo Hung was awakened by the touch of a hand upon a shoulder.

"You are ill?" said a voice, in excellent Chinese.

The beggar gave no start. He just opened his eyes, and looked up at a "foreign-devil," all of whom Wo Hung hated venomously, but discreetly; for he remembered the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, and knew that these

The Society of the Silver Shoe

By

CHARLES GILSON

"green-eyed barbarians" could at times be dangerous.

He hated them for their noisiness, their clumsiness, their bad manners and their wealth. He hated them because they had no respect for the antiquities of China, because they so obviously regarded themselves as belonging to a superior race.

This young man was dressed in white flannels, with white shoes that were rubber-soled. And he carried in his hand an extraordinary looking implement that Wo Hung imagined to be a musical instrument of sorts; for, although the old beggar may have seen a tennis-racket before, he had no idea what it was.

For all that he knew the young man well by sight; and Wo Hung though he was sick and old, never forgot a face. He sat, year in, year out, at either the Chien-men or the Hatamen Gates, and he had seen the same thousands of faces day after day. Though he knew the names of few, he knew the business of many; and he knew that this particular foreign-devil lived in the United States Legation.

"I am sick," said he. "I am old, and I die, unless I obtain food to eat."

Whining, he held out a trembling hand for alms and received a Mexican silver dollar.

Seldom in his life had Wo Hung handled so much money. A handful of copper was all he ever expected.

With difficulty he got to his feet, and stood for a moment quite motionless, leaning upon his long staff. Though he hated foreign-devils, he was about to express gratitude he did not feel; but, before he could do so, the young man was gone. He had passed through the gate into the Tartar City.

Still leaning with both hands upon his staff, Wo Hung hobbled into the main street, and entered an eating-shop, where he ate his fill, fell asleep for a while, and then reappeared upon the drawbridge at the Hatamen Gate, sitting upon the parapet and crying out: "Give alms! Give alms to a starving pauper, lest he die!"

FOR three hours, until it was late in the afternoon, Wo Hung called upon the passers-by to have pity on him. But no heed was taken of him, until there came from the direction of the Chinese City a mandarin's chair.

That this was a mandarin of high degree there could be but little doubt, though there was nothing of the great man himself to be seen. The chair was carried by four powerful coolies; and a man went before them, beating upon a gong and crying out in a loud voice, "Make way for Chung-li, a mandarin of the Red Button, lord of the Peacock's Feather, the Taotai of Tung-chau!"

The great Chung-li could not be seen, for the chair was covered with a kind of hood and the curtains on either side were closely drawn. However, the mandarin himself could see everything that he wished to see, through little peep-holes in the curtains. And when the chair was midway across the bridge, he ordered his coolies to halt before the bent and shrunken figure of Wo Hung.

The beggar, seeing that a man of wealth was at hand, repeated his cries in a voice even more pitiful than ever.

"Alms, your Excellency!" he pleaded. "I am old, and I am starving!"

A hand emerged from the mandarin's chair. It was long and brown and bony, and the fingers were like the claws of a bird of prey. And upon one of these fingers was a silver ring, fashioned like a snake, a hooded cobra, in which was set a bloodstone.

The beggar held out his hand for money. Something was pressed into his palm. The mandarin passed upon his way, the man with a gong crying out as before:

"Make way for Chung-li, a mandarin of the Red Button and lord of the Peacock's Feather, one who has acquired great merit!"

For a moment, Wo Hung had had visions of receiving another dollar. Eagerly he looked at that which he held in his hand. It was neither a dollar or any kind of coin at all, it was a little silver shoe that was not an inch in length.

Wo Hung raised his slanting eyebrows. Something like a shudder shook his lean, withered frame. And then he grinned, showing the few yellow teeth he still possessed. He had not grinned for years.

He went hobbling on his way towards Legation Street, the European Quarter, where lived the ministers of foreign states, their secretaries and officials, the business men of Pekin, of every nationality in the world, as well as the officers and soldiers of the various legation guards.

At the wall that divides the British Legation from the Japanese, Wo Hung passed the young man with the tennis-racket who had given him a dollar, and who was now so hot from his game that the perspiration was streaming from his face.

Wo Hung attempted to slink past unseen; but, to his surprise, and not a little to his annoyance, the young man recognised him.

"How now?" he asked. "To him who has an empty stomach there is neither warmth in the sunshine nor laughter in the world. No need to tell me you have eaten. You look a different man."

Wo Hung sucked his teeth and bowed.

"To your august presence," he mumbled, "I am indebted for all the days of my miserable and worthless life."

The other laughed and passed upon his way. And the moment his back was turned, Wo Hung spat upon the ground.

"Christian swine!" said he, under his breath. "The tide has turned; your days are numbered. The Silver Shoe has been passed from hand to hand."

The young man walked rapidly, unconscious of the imprecations that followed him. He crossed the open square in front of the entrance to the Imperial City, and entered one of the narrow streets, a blind alley, in the native quarter beyond. Here he turned in at the gateway of a large yamen, where he crossed a garden to the main entrance of the principal building, a red-tiled, substantial Chinese house.

Finding the door open, he walked straight in, as one is entitled to do in the case of the house of an intimate friend. He passed down a short corridor, his rubber-soled shoes making no sound; but, upon turning a corner, he came to an abrupt stop, and stood staring at a spectacle that was at once obvious and surprising.

Immediately in front of him was a door; and from beyond this door the voices of two men were audible; the one, a quiet, lazy drawl; the other, a deep, gruff voice, a kind of growl.

There would have been nothing, in the least, unusual in this, had it not been that before the door was the stooping figure of a remarkably tall and lean Chinaman. He was dressed in a long white coat that reached below his knees, and his thick, well-oiled pigtail was at least four feet in length. His back was half turned to the visitor, of whose presence, not three yards away from him, he was sublimely ignorant. He was stooping forward with his hands upon his bent knees, and his ear glued to the key-hole.

The young man took a step forward and gently touched the Chinese with his tennis-racket.

The man straightened quickly, though he showed no vestige of surprise. He merely bowed slightly, and then opened the door.

"Mr. Randal Archer," he announced, "of the American Legation."

The young man paused in the doorway, and looked the Chinese straight in the face.

"Gee, but you're a cool customer!" said he, in English.

"No savvy, master," replied the man who, having admitted Archer into a large room that contained anything between four and five thousand books, noiselessly closed the door.

Archer waited a moment, and then opened the door again quickly and looked out. With a grunt of satisfaction, he then nodded to his host.

CHAPTER II

TONG

THE two occupants of the room, so far as personal appearance was concerned, were just about as different as two men can be. The one was a big man, the other was small; the first was as untidy as the second was immaculate.

To describe the little man first. Captain Sir John Raikes, commonly known among his friends as Jacky Raikes, was the officer in command of a company of British infantry doing duty in Pekin as legation guard. His black hair was brushed straight back from a very sunburnt forehead. He gave one the appearance of being what is usually called "a lady's man"; for his clothes fitted him to perfection, his small black moustache was neatly trimmed, he was unquestionably good-looking with clean-cut, regular features, and carried a monocle in his right eye as naturally as if he had been born with it. He wore a pair of Bedford cord riding-breeches that had obviously come from Savile Row or Cork Street, where the leading West End London tailors reside; and his brown polo boots were so highly polished that they might have served as mirrors.

As for his companion, he might have been hewn out of granite, a statue by Rodin: a huge man, of between forty and fifty years of age, who did not appear to know what to do with his arms and legs, who was dressed in a dirty white coat from which most of the buttons were missing, and very crumpled trousers that had also once been white. He wore no tie, but a shirt open at the neck, displaying a muscular throat. Between his teeth he held a large briarwood pipe.

His face was rugged and wrinkled; he eyes bright, fierce, and almost green in color. Everything about him suggested abnormal strength, both moral and physical. His hands were huge; his bones like those of a gorilla. In spite of all this he had the broad, lofty forehead of a thinker, a man of intellect. His hair was a veritable mop that stood upright on his head like the brown bristles of a broom.

Doctor David MacKinnon was, perhaps, the best known man in all China. A Scot by birth, he had never altogether lost the kindly accent of the Highlands, though his deep voice was as rough and unpolished as his appearance. He was admitted to be the greatest authority in the world upon all matters relating to the Far East. For years now he had lived by himself in the heart of Pekin City. He could talk nearly every dialect in China, and was one of the few white men who could read a Chinese newspaper as easily and as rapidly as if it were English.

When Randal Archer was announced, neither moved from the comfortable chair in which he was seated, though Doctor MacKinnon took his pipe from his lips.

"Young man," said he, "it isn't usual to enter a room without a word to your host, and then open the door and look out, as if you didn't think it worth your while to come in."

Archer jerked a thumb in the direction of the door.

"That fellow is your compradore, isn't he?" he asked.

MacKinnon nodded.

"I don't want to appear rude, Doctor," said the young American; "but, if you think you can trust him, you're making a mighty mistake."

"Far from trusting the accomplished and versatile Tong," said Doctor MacKinnon, "I have very good reason to believe him to be an unmitigated rogue."

"He can understand English, of course?"

"As well as myself," said the doctor.

Randal Archer whistled, and throwing himself into a vacant chair, helped himself to a cigar from an open box.

"Again," said he, "I've no wish to be thought inquisitive. But do you and Raikes happen to have been talking about anything of importance during the last ten minutes or so?"

"Something deucedly important," drawled Raikes. "Matter o' fact, the doctor has been doing his level best to put the wind up me. He tells me there's a new secret society on the move, with the jolly, old Boxer slogan of 'China for the Chinese' and 'death to the foreign-devils' and all that Tommy rot. And when they awoke in the morning, lo and behold, they were dead!" he concluded.

"The Yellow Peril," said MacKinnon. "What do you think about it, Archer?"

The American, having thrown his tennis-racket upon the floor, was lighting his cigar.

"This is interesting," said he. "I know what the doctor means. I've heard quite a lot of the secret Society of the Silver Shoe; and in a way, I can get the Chinese view-point. Here's a country of four hundred million inhabitants, the richest country in the world, perhaps, where labor is comparatively cheap. What have we Americans and Europeans been doing for a hundred years? Exploiting the wealth of China and Chinese labor; and naturally, a certain section of the natives object. They do what the Chinese have always done since time immemorial: they form a secret society which rapidly increases its numbers and becomes extraordinarily powerful. I've often heard of the Silver Shoe, but I've never been able to discover its real object."

Doctor MacKinnon's deep voice echoed in the room like the notes of an organ.

"Its object, in so many plain words," said he, "is to murder every foreigner in the land, man, woman and child. They would have China isolated from the rest of the world, as isolated as Tibet. You may think that impossible. I'm not sure. They are a wonderful people. They managed to get along very well without us for something like five thousand years; and I see no reason why they shouldn't do so again."

"Nor do I," said Raikes. "I've been just long enough in the country to realise that I don't understand these people and I never will. They're so bally secretive and cocksure of themselves. You two fellows are different. In fact, the doctor has lived so long in China that he's half a Chinaman already; but what beats me is how he has found out as much as he has."

"I spend nearly all my life among the Chinese," said MacKinnon. "I'm the only white man who lives in the native city. I listen to what I hear; and it is not difficult for one who understands the language as well as I do, to catch occasional snatches of conversation, and to put two and two together."

"But why the Silver Shoe?" asked Raikes. "Sounds like a fairy story: Cinderella, and that sort of thing."

"Very far from a fairy tale," said the doctor, solemnly. "I have some reason for believing that the Silver Shoe is an instrument of torture."

At that Sir John Raikes dropped his eye-glass, caught it in his hand, and placed it in his other eye. This was a habit of his that he performed after the manner of a conjuring-trick; and never by any other method had he ever been known to express the slightest emotion.

"By gad!" said he. "Looks as if I might find something better to do in this overcrowded and distinctly unhealthy locality than knock a polo ball about the grounds of the jolly, old Temple of Heaven!"

RANDAL ARCHER, who had remained silent for some minutes, now got to his feet.

"Get back to where we started, Doctor," said he. "You can't trust that boy of yours."

"I never denied it," boomed MacKinnon.

"I came into this house," Archer went on, "without ringing the bell, because the front door happened to be open, and because I know you well enough, Doctor, to walk in when I want to. As I'm wearing rubber tennis-shoes, I made no noise; and in the passage I found your boy, Tong, listening behind that door, with his ear at the key-hole."

Doctor MacKinnon, who was scraping out his pipe, did not even look up.

"That's interesting," said he. "Tong is no ordinary compradore, but a man of parts. A White Button mandarin, a Manchu, with enough money to buy up the three of us, his activities are varied, as I discovered, to my cost, the other day. There was a diplomatic dinner last week at the Japanese Legation to which I had the honor to be asked. Nobody was there but the Japanese and English ministers, their first secretaries and myself. The matter under discussion was a certain secret treaty, the main clauses of which were roughly drawn up at the dinner table. By the following evening, every item and detail of that discussion was known to Chung-li, the Taotai of Tung-chau, who, as you probably know, is the head of the Chinese Foreign Office."

Sir John Raikes again changed his eyeglass from one eye to the other.

"Delightful people!" he exclaimed. "No wonder they regard us as the scum of the earth. But how did they do it?"

"The Japanese Minister had hired extra servants for the evening," explained MacKinnon. "These servants, who were supplied by my compradore, entered the dining-room in relays. Every one of them could understand English. They listened to every word that was said at the table; and each one in turn committed to writing what he had heard, whilst it was fresh in his memory. These scraps of paper were put together in their proper order; and the whole document was forwarded to Chung-li, the very man whom their Excellencies wished to keep in the dark."

"How did you find out?" asked Raikes.

"By the merest chance," said MacKinnon. "The following morning the Japanese minister told me he thought the dinner a great success, and asked me to thank my compradore for his services, presenting me with a ten dollar bill for the worthy Tong. Now, I had not the slightest idea until then that Tong had had anything to do with it; and as I had very good reasons for thinking the man a first-class rascal, I made certain inquiries, and in the end got the truth out of a coolie who had been employed washing up in the scullery."

"Looks as if you've harbored a viper in your bosom, Doctor," said Raikes. "Rough luck on the viper, what!"

"I may not know so much about poker as our friend Archer here," said MacKinnon, "but I know how to bluff in the game of life. If you two wait a moment, you'll see the biter bit."

He crossed the room to a writing-desk, where he hastily wrote several vertical lines with the Chinese inkbrush.

"There," said he. "That's a letter to the Japanese minister. I've used very few Chinese characters. Most of it is written in the *kata-kana* Japanese alphabet, which Tong can't read. I intend to send him out of the house with this, to get rid of him. He'll be certain to take it himself, as he'll think it's something important. He'll bribe somebody to translate it for him in the Japanese Legation, and will merely learn that, at an early date, I intend to return the minister's hospitality. But that's not the point: he'll be out of the house for, at least, half an hour."

"And then?" drawled Raikes.

"Then," said Doctor MacKinnon, "we shall see."

CHAPTER III

ESPIONAGE

UPON the ringing of the bell, the tall compradore presented himself, entering the room as noiselessly as a cat.

Though most Manchus are hard-visaged, with complexions that are almost nut-brown, this man had the pale-lemon colored skin of a Cantonese, and dark, expressionless, almond-shaped eyes that he directed straight and fearlessly at the American.

"Ah, Tong!" said the doctor. "Be so good as to take this letter to his Excellency, the Japanese minister. It is urgent."

Without a word the compradore glided rather than walked from the room.

"I would take my oath," drawled Raikes, when the door was closed, "that man carries a knife under his coat."

"By no means improbable," said MacKinnon. "I myself am not unprepared."

He produced from a hip-pocket a small gun-metal automatic pistol.

"Doctor," said Archer, "I've always thought you were born in the wrong century. The Elizabethan age would have suited you better. You would have been a soldier of fortune, or even a pirate, instead of a man of science and a scholar. It's a mystery to me how you've been contented to settle down in the heart of Pekin and surround yourself with books."

"Pekin!" exclaimed MacKinnon. "A city of walls within walls, of intrigues, plots and stratagems. A land of liars."

He had walked to the window, where he stood looking out upon what went by the name of a garden, where a few flowering shrubs grew wild amid broken earthenware and the ruins of a summer-house.

"Come," said he. "Tong should be well upon his way by now, and it's beneath his dignity to hasten. If he chooses to pry into my affairs, I can do the same for him. We'll see what we can find."

Followed by his two companions, he left the room, and passed from the corridor into a narrow passage to the left.

At the end of the passage, he entered the compradore's room. Though Tong did not sleep in the house, there was a bed here upon which the Manchu enjoyed a daily siesta and the solace of an opium-pipe.

The room was very untidy. The bed had not been made. Clothes were littered about the floor. In one corner was a large desk, covered with papers, the majority of which proved to be receipts and unpaid bills.

MacKinnon, assisted by Archer, went hastily through these papers, failing to find anything incriminating. Raikes, in the meantime, had discovered a white leather box under the bed.

"It's locked," said he.

"I may have a key that fits it," said MacKinnon. "That's a common enough kind of box in China. I've one myself, more or less like it."

He opened the lock without difficulty, and bundled out the contents upon the bed, a strange collection of miscellaneous articles: ornaments and knick-knacks in ivory and bronze, which the compradore had no doubt accepted as *kumshaw* from merchants who had had dealings with his master; several painted snuff-bottles, a brass ink-box, one or two jade seals, and a broken ivory opium-pipe.

"There's nothing in here," said Raikes.

"Nothing at all," said MacKinnon.

He picked up the brass ink-box and shook it. Something rattled inside.

He opened the lid, and showed the contents to both Raikes and Archer.

The lid fitted perfectly. Inside the lid was a plate of polished black stone upon which to mix the ink. The box was brass outside and bronze inside; it contained nothing but a little silver shoe.

NOT a word was said. They repacked the leather box, and put it back where Raikes had found it, under the bed and then returned to the library, where MacKinnon seated himself straddle-legged upon a chair, with his arms folded on the back of it.

"What do you make of it, Raikes?" he asked.

"Rather like the famous *chupatty* that was passed round from hand to hand before the Indian Mutiny," said the British officer. "My grandfather, by the way, was killed in Lucknow."

"That's what it amounts to," said MacKinnon. "They are strange people; they attach unnecessary importance to tokens and symbols. The members of this society may number thousands. I intend to find out who's at the head of it; and if you two fellows will help me, I promise you, I will. Every secret society is under an autocrat, whose orders are obeyed to the letter, who as often as not has power of life and death. If I can find out who this man is, and prove my case against him, I can make the question an international one. The government can be approached, and additional troops landed without delay."

"Well, it's up to you, Doctor," said Archer. "So far as I'm concerned, I'm your man."

"In an unofficial capacity," drawled Captain Sir John Raikes, "and on the strict understanding that I accept no responsibility, you may also rely upon me."

"And nowhere can I find two better men," said Doctor MacKinnon. "You both realise the risk?"

"Sure," said Archer.

Raikes yawned.

The doctor rose to his feet, and began to pace the room, speaking slowly:

"When he returns, Tong will see at a glance that we've ransacked his room. He also knows that Archer caught him eavesdropping. He will therefore have a shrewd suspicion that the cat is out of the bag. What will he do, but report at once to headquarters? And therefore, when he leaves my house to-night, he must be followed."

Randal Archer got slowly to his feet.

"And with your permission, Doctor," said he, "by me. You can't leave the house yourself, and Raikes doesn't understand a word of Chinese. Guess you can rig me out as a Chinaman?"

"I can do more than that," replied MacKinnon. "I can disguise you so that your own brother wouldn't recognise you."

"I'll do my best," said the American. "I'm under your orders, anyway."

"I'll give you your instructions now," said the doctor.

Raikes yawned again, and stretched himself. "Looks as if I'm not on in this act," said he.

"You're not," growled MacKinnon. "But, unless I'm much mistaken, you'll be in front of the footlights all right before the play's finished. You may pretend to be a fool, Raikes; but I summed you up the very first day I saw you. Besides, I'm never likely to forget you once saved my life."

Archer looked up, surprised.

"I never knew that!" said he.

"Then, time you did," said MacKinnon; "for you two will have to work in double harness. Raikes told me his one ambition was to shoot a cave tiger; so I took him down to Amoy."

"It was a near thing," laughed Raikes, interrupting. "The Doctor was badly mauled. It was more by good luck than good management on my part that he came out of it alive. He and I went into the cave together, where the tiger was known to be in residence. We were accompanied by the usual Chinamen, armed with lanterns and long spears; and every one of them did a guy, the moment the tiger charged. I don't quite know what happened, except that we were both knocked over like nine-pins and our rifles sent flying out of our hands; and MacKinnon, who was at the business end of the beast, got the worst of it."

"And Raikes killed that tiger with his hunting knife," said the doctor. "When he was pulled out from underneath the dead animal, his clothes were saturated in blood and his eyeglass was still in his eye."

"Fiction!" said Raikes. "MacKinnon wasn't in a fit state to notice anything. He was half unconscious, with the flesh torn clean away from his left shoulder."

"I'll carry the scar to my dying day," said the doctor. "But we must get to business. I'll show you a dressing-room that, I flatter myself, is somewhat unique."

Producing his bunch of keys from his pocket, he left the room and conducted his two companions up the stairs, where he unlocked the door of a little room at the end of the house.

This room, which was surrounded by shelves, was illumined by a single window of frosted glass. Upon the shelves were a number of bundles, every one of which, as the doctor explained, contained a different Chinese costume, ranging from richly embroidered mandarin's robes to the dirty and tattered garments of a coolie.

Randal Archer, of the American Legation, was transformed within a very few minutes into a short-coated Chinaman of the working class, the kind of man who might have come into Pekin from the country.

His skin was dyed yellow; a short false pigtail was wound about his head; and he was even supplied with a bundle that contained his evening meal.

"There's only one exit from my house," said the doctor, "and that is into the main street that leads to the Chien-men Gate. If you sit down at the gate itself, no one will take any notice of you, and you'll be bound to see Tong when he passes. Follow him, find out where he goes, and come back and report. You'll find us both waiting for you here. You had better leave before Tong returns."

CHAPTER IV

THE MASQUERADERS

REALISING the importance of the part he had to play Randal Archer entered into the spirit of the thing. Though not more than twenty-eight years of age, he had lived several years in China, and had studied the people, their manners and customs. With the assistance of his friend, Doctor MacKinnon, he had mastered the language in almost record time.

Seating himself upon the steps before the gateway into the Imperial City, he opened the bundle containing his food, and sat nibbling a rice-cake, as he watched the people that thronged the Chien-men.

As it grew later, it became cooler; the gate was closed for the night, and the streets were less crowded. Archer, to stretch his legs, got to his feet and walked across the square. Above him, on top of the wall around the American Legation, he could see the tall figure of the sentry, silhouetted against the starlight.

He heard the heavy tapping of a stick upon the pavement, and turning, recognised the bent and shrivelled figure of Wo Hung, the beggar, who, walking more rapidly than usual, had passed through the Chien-men.

The American was astonished. He realised then, more than ever before, the importance of what they had discovered and the desperate nature of his own enterprise.

The greatest and most formidable of all the Pekin walls is that which divides the Tartar City in the north from the Chinese City in the south. In this wall there are but three gates: the Chien-men in the center, my affairs, I can do the same for him. We'll see what we can find."

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The greatest and most formidable of all the Pekin walls is that which divides the Tartar City in the north from the Chinese City in the south. In this wall there are but three gates: the Chien-men in the center, with the Shun-men to the west, and the Hatamen to the east of it. Since the days when the Chinese and Tartars were deadly foes, these gates have always been guarded and closed at night, so that all communication is cut off between the two cities.

And yet, Wo Hung, a Chinese, had been allowed to pass from the southern to the Tartar City! That here was a conspiracy, a well-organised plot in which the guard itself was implicated, was apparent. Still keeping an eye upon the extremity of the blind alley in which was Doctor MacKinnon's house, Archer drew nearer to the gate, determined to find out as much as he could.

In the course of the next half hour, more than a dozen men were allowed to enter; and the American, keeping in the shadow of the archway, observed that none of these had given any password. On being questioned by the Chinese officer in charge of the guard, each man had extended an open palm that was examined in the lamplight, before he had been allowed to pass upon his way. And every man had taken the same road. Skirting the Legation Quarter, they had crossed the nullah that drains the northern city into the district of the Hatamen.

A young man with such a lively imagination as Randal Archer did not find it difficult to guess what this talisman was, the "open-sesame" of the Chien-men Gate. He knew it, even before he overheard a few quick whispered words. Superior to custom and tradition, and even the authority of the military commander of the city, was the Silver Shoe, the symbol of a secret brotherhood.

Archer went back to his old place on the steps before the Imperial gateway, and sitting down, tried to think the matter out. If the government troops had been sworn in as members of the secret society, the matter was indeed serious. Moreover, it was unthinkable that the officer in command of the gateway would dare so deliberately to disobey his standing orders, were it not that he had been authorised to do so by some high authority.

Randal Archer found himself a prey to somewhat conflicting emotions: he was at once elated and depressed. He found the excitement exhilarating; it was as if his nerves were stimulated. At the same time, from what he had already learned, he could no longer be blind to the fact that a storm was brewing that might shake the whole civilised world.

He was deep in these reflections, when a white figure that he recognised at once as Tong, MacKinnon's compradore, emerged from the blind alley to his right, crossed the square and approached the nullah.

Archer allowed him to pass, and then glided after him on tiptoe. The nullah itself was easy of access; for, at that time of the year, it was almost dried up, no rain having fallen since the previous September. Also, in that part of Pekin it was easy to follow the man without being seen. Though there were many open spaces, the ground was irregular and broken.

Farther on, in the narrow, squalid streets of the Tartar City, he found his task more difficult. In order to keep the man in sight, he had to draw quite near to him.

Still walking rapidly towards the north, Tong crossed the main street itself, and then dived into a narrow side street that was only a few yards in width, where the atmosphere was rank with the smell of decaying vegetation.

THE American could never have held the man in sight, had it not been that the moon had risen, a half moon, continually fading and vanishing behind fleecy, drifting clouds. He caught occasional glimpses of Tong's white coat; and then, during a period of darkness, the man suddenly disappeared in a labyrinth, a veritable maze of winding lanes and alleys.

In the windows of a few houses there were lights, but none of them bright enough to illumine these foul, twisting passages, which were more like gloomy drains than public thoroughfares.

On a sudden, Archer was brought to a standstill by the sound of voices—voices that seemed quite near to him, but which at first he could not locate.

With the utmost caution, moving almost at a snail's pace, he crept along the wall of a large, rambling building, constructed after the fashion of a pagoda, each story being smaller in area than that below it. As he reached the corner of this building, the moon suddenly emerged; and he beheld, not fifteen yards away from him, two men, one of whom was undoubtedly the compradore.

Tong's black pigtail could be seen in the moonlight, bisecting in a vertical line the entire length of his long white coat. The face of the other man, who was seated cross-legged on the ground, was plainly visible.

There was no mistaking the shrunken, withered features of Wo Hung.

To avoid being seen, Archer had flattened himself against the wall of the pagoda, the overhanging roof of which screened him from the moonlight. He could hear the voices of the two men quite clearly, though he could not catch everything that was said.

"I am come," Wo Hung was saying, "to do the bidding of the Silver Shoe."

"How many are already here?" asked Tong.

"Not many," said the beggar. "It is yet early, and several will be late."

They continued to talk with lowered voices, Archer being able to distinguish no more than an occasional word that conveyed little or nothing to him. He occupied his time—for he dared not move so much as an inch—in making a mental note of the site.

It would be easy to recognise the pagoda itself, if he could succeed in finding it again. On either side of the main door were wooden pillars made from the trunks of trees, stripped of bark and painted. These pillars were certainly very old, for they were worm-eaten and slanted at such perilous angles that the whole house looked as if it might collapse at any moment.

Minutes elapsed that seemed to the American like hours; then Tong and the old beggar, still talking in whispers, entered the building and disappeared.

And thereupon Archer lost no time in making himself scarce; but, if he retired rapidly, he did so with his wits about him. On the doctor's advice, he had armed himself with a knife as well as a revolver; and with the former he now scratched a cross on the brickwork of every corner he turned, until he found himself once again in the street of the Hatamen.

Hence he knew his way back to the legations. This broad thoroughfare traverses the Tartar City from north to south, from wall to wall. The roadway has never been made. In the rainy season it is flooded; and so uneven is its surface that children have been known to have been drowned in the puddles. It is packed with humanity by day, whilst the middle of the street is used by the inhabitants as a convenient refuse-heap. Rejoicing in the flowery title of the Street of Sublime Learning, it is the foulest and longest cesspit in the world; but, because it is the main artery of the city of Pekin, it deserves to rank with such famous thoroughfares as Broadway, Picadilly and the Rue de Rivoli. It is, indeed, the one great street of China.

Walking as rapidly as he dared, Archer regained Doctor MacKinnon's yamen in little more than half an hour. There he found both the doctor and Raikes in the library, where the atmosphere was thick with smoke.

He related his experience as briefly as he could.

"All's well that ends well," said MacKinnon. "There can be little doubt, Archer, that you've discovered the actual headquarters of the Silver Shoe. You're quite sure you can find your way there again?"

"With the help of a light or an electric torch," said the American. "I marked every corner."

"You're prepared to go back again, now?"

Archer nodded.

"I'll see it out," said he.

"Good!" The doctor got to his feet. "And during your absence," said he, "Raikes and I have not been idle. What do you think of these?"

He threw down upon the writing-desk three little silver shoes, beautifully wrought, each of which was less than an inch in length.

"Quick work, eh, what?" said Raikes.

"How did you manage it?" asked Archer of MacKinnon.

"A simple matter in a country of expert craftsmen," replied the doctor. "A native silversmith, whom I know that I can trust for a very good reason. A skilful artificer who supplements his income by means of a brisk business in counterfeit coin. Tsau-wen has made more chop-dollars than any other man in China. I've enough evidence against him to keep him in a *kangue* for months. Well, we paid Tsau-wen a call, and this is the result."

Raikes glanced at his wrist-watch.

"Doctor," said he, "it's past eleven. If we're going to do anything worth doing tonight, we had better get a move on."

"We are going to do nothing less than risk our lives," said MacKinnon, "in what may prove a foolish attempt to find out what takes place within the lodge of a Chinese secret society. In that cupboard, Archer, you will find sandwiches and a very excellent bottle of wine. Raikes and I have dined. We'll be back again in half an hour."

He returned in less than that time, when the transformation that had taken place in the appearance of the British officer was even more remarkable than MacKinnon's own disguise.

Sir John Raikes had not only lost his moustache, but the forepart of his head had been shaved. His skin had been stained, and his eyes so cleverly pencilled at the corners that they resembled the malicious almond-shaped eyes of a celestial. Dressed in a long robe of lemon-coloured silk, the doctor introduced him to Archer as an unfortunate young man, the only son of a silk merchant in Yunnan City, who has been deaf and dumb since childhood.

The doctor himself was attired as a Manchu mandarin. And the manner in which he walked into the room proved him to be an actor of no mean order. He had acquired the peculiar shuffling gait of a high Chinese official, and handled his fan in the approved manner, an even more skilful accomplishment.

"And now to business," said he, "though in all probability there is no particular hurry. For some unknown reason, nearly all important business in this country is conducted in the small hours of the morning. Though we must not separate, we must not walk together. Archer can go first, to show us the way. You follow him, Raikes; and I'll bring up the rear. But, before we leave this house, I want you both to be quite sure you realise what this means. Though we are armed, not one of us may see the sun rise in a few hours' time."

"My dear, good fellow," said Raikes, testily, "get on with the good work. We're well aware that you can't rob a bee-hive without running the risk of being stung."

MacKinnon laughed, and opened the door for Archer.

"Lead on, Macduff," said the Britisher, fumbling for a monocle that wasn't there.

CHAPTER V

THE PAGODA

AT DEAD of night they crossed the great sleeping city. Down in the nullah, where there was no more than a little trickling rivulet of foul water flowing southward to the Water Gate, frogs were croaking, whilst crickets were singing amid the thickets and brambles that grew upon the ramparts.

Their path was hedged in by massive, ageless walls, walls that had witnessed sieges and tragedies, without number, throughout the centuries. The yellow tiles of the Forbidden City caught the moonlight; memorial archways stood forth against the stars like deformed, gigantic spectres. Few people were abroad even in the street of the Hatamen itself; and these were for the most part homeless outcasts who lay sleeping under the awnings of the shops and booths.

Archer waited for his two companions at the dark corner where he had lost sight of Tong. Thence they went upon their way together, MacKinnon and Raikes keeping a sharp lookout, whilst the American verified each turning with the help of an electric torch. The pagoda, when they came upon it unexpectedly, had no longer the appearance of a half ruined and deserted building. It now looked ghostly, a fairy palace, fantastic and mysterious. For, though the shutters of all the windows had been closed, lights from within could be seen here and there between countless crevices and cracks; and moreover, these lights were all green, the green of the deeps of the sea, which made the pagoda look as if it was the dwelling place of the denizens of some strange underworld.

MacKinnon now took the lead. He tried the handle of the front door and found it open. Followed by his two companions, he entered, to be at once accosted by a janitor, a man with his pigtail curled about his head, who was stripped to the waist and held in his right hand a sword, the blade of which was diamond-shaped.

This man demanded their business; whereat all three, without a word, extended their open palms, each displaying a little silver shoe.

This was their greatest gamble—a mere leap in the dark. For aught they knew, some countersign of which they were in ignorance might be necessary.

Eagerly scanning the face of the janitor, they stood ready either to show fight or to fly for their lives. But, to their relief, and not a little to their surprise, the man did no more than draw back a curtain, beyond which they found themselves in a kind of ante-chamber, in the centre of which was a bronze bowl upon a pedestal of stone.

And before this pedestal was seated cross-legged none other than Wo Hung; a beggar no longer, for over his rags was a richly embroidered robe.

When Archer recognised the man, he was conscious of a quickened heart-beat. For some reason or other the very sight of this hideous cripple brought home to him the magnitude of their adventure and the grave risk they ran.

The dimly-lighted room, the smell of dust, the strangely embroidered curtains straight in front of them, as well as the silence of the place—all these could not fail to make a deep impression even upon MacKinnon.

Wo Hung got slowly to his feet. From the bronze bowl, he took three masks of a pale green silk—masks that did not fit close to the face, but which hung straight down to below the chin like valances.

As yet, not a word had been exchanged. The thing seemed simplicity itself. The mentality of Sir John Raikes was somewhat peculiar: so far, he was greatly interested, and even slightly amused, for he did not fully appreciate his danger.

That was not the case with either Doctor MacKinnon or the young American. They were well familiar with the country; they knew that these secret societies indulged in the most complicated ritual and elaborate ceremonies; and if so far, they had neither been questioned nor put to any test, such an ordeal was certain to be before them.

As soon as they had put on the masks that had been given them, Wo Hung drew aside the embroidered curtains, and motioned them to enter an even smaller chamber, where an old man with a grey goat's beard and huge tortoise-shell-rimmed spectacles was seated at a table upon which were writing materials and long scrolls of paper.

Though it was certainly fortunate, it was natural enough that he should address Doctor MacKinnon first. China is a country in which a man's social status is more or less apparent from his clothes; and though all three were masked, they looked what they pretended to be: a mandarin, a young man of the merchant class and a farmer from the country. The old man at the table, with a courteous bow, began with the man of rank.

"And what is your official number?" he demanded.

MacKinnon, through the little slits in his pale-green mask, glanced at the papers on the table, and was quick to take in the situation.

Every member of the society, it appeared, had a number, and these numbers could be checked upon a register. It would be sheer lunacy to give a number at random. He would be asked his name, and it would be discovered at once that he was an imposter.

"Neither I nor my two friends," said the doctor, "have yet been alloted official numbers. You will not find our names, I think, upon your list. Indeed, we have journeyed many miles, from the distant province of Yunnan, to enroll ourselves as members of the Silver Shoe."

The old man stroked his scanty beard. They could gather nothing from his face, the greater part of which was hidden behind his spectacles.

"How came you into the possession of the silver shoe?" he asked.

MacKinnon had a ready answer.

"There came a stranger to the city of Tali-fu," said he, "who told us of the society and its aims; and when we expressed our eagerness to join, he presented each of us with the token that has brought us safely hither, through the Chien-men."

For a moment, the old man seemed in doubt.

"Then not one of you is branded?" he asked, as if surprised.

MacKinnon made a shot in the dark.

"It is *for* that reason we are here," said he.

THE old man, telling them to wait a moment, got to his feet. With both hands, after the fashion of a man who swims, he parted some heavy curtains in front of him, and vanished into pitch darkness. The doctor turned quickly to Raikes and whispered in his ear.

"Remember, you're dumb," said he, "though I did wrong to bring you."

"Upon my life I wouldn't have missed this for worlds," said the Englishman. "It's like a comic opera."

The old man reappeared. He came out of the darkness like some burrowing animal.

"I have announced," said he, "that three initiates await the pleasure of the president. In the meantime, I am to make an entry of your names."

"I am Lu-wei, a mandarin of the Red Button, a prefect in the province of Yunnan," said MacKinnon.

"And you?" asked the registrar, turning to Raikes.

MacKinnon intervened.

"This young man," said he, "is grievously afflicted, since in early childhood, after a serious illness, he lost the power of speech. There are many such in Yunnan Province where the plague has filled the graveyards."

"So I have heard," said the old man. "But why should he be here? Why should he wish to join the Silver Shoe?"

"Can a dumb man not hate?" exclaimed the doctor. "Can one who is deaf not love his country and revere his ancestors? If all that I have heard be true, it is not words that you demand of us, but deeds to prove our worth."

He could not have produced a better argument. The old man was obviously pleased. He shook hands with himself, and nodded approval, sucking his teeth.

"There is wisdom in the South," said he. "Tell me the young man's name that I may write it down."

"Tsin How," said MacKinnon. "My own nephew and the son of a wealthy silk merchant in the City of Yunnan."

The registrar turned last to the simple peasant.

"Lu-fong," said Archer, "a farmer of Pao-ting-fu."

The old man made his final entry, allotted them three consecutive numbers, and then told them to follow him through the curtains, where it was so dark that they could not see an inch before their faces.

They stood helpless for a moment, groping blindly, touching one another, but nothing else. They could hear low voices, as if in the distance, as if muffled by the curtains that surrounded them. And then a bright and almost blinding greenish light suffused the darkness; and they saw the old man standing before them, holding aside other curtains, that they might enter a great room that was like the nave of a cathedral.

They beheld a scene as impressive as it was alarming, more like a weird nightmare than an actual fact.

Around three of the four walls of the chamber were wooden benches upon which were seated many scores of Chinese of all ranks and classes, judging by their clothes, though all were wearing loose green masks similar to those with which they themselves had been supplied.

The central portion of the room was carpeted; and upon this open space one or two velvet-shoed officials moved rapidly, but quite noiselessly, from place to place. A the farther end of the room was a raise dais, or stage, on which a man was seate on a high backed chair, masked like th others, but dressed in richly embroidere robes, and wearing the hat of a mandarin o the Red Button.

Suspended from the ceiling were Chines lanterns of green oil-paper that flooded th place with a strange, cold light, making th masked gathering look like a ghostly army of cadaverous spectators, all motionless and silent.

Indeed, there reigned a stillness in th place that was like that of the grave. They were conscious that all eyes were turne upon them, as they stood shoulder to shoulder before the curtains. So silent was that awful chamber that they felt that they could hear the beating of their own hearts

There came towards them a man wh was extraordinarily fat, who bade them advance to a kind of altar in the centre of th room, upon which incense had been thrown for the atmosphere was charged with sweet, sickly smell.

The fat man questioned them briefly i regard to their credentials, though he neve asked their names. The doctor, continuin to act as spokesman, vouched for the sincerity both of himself and his two friends He spoke in mandarin Chinese, the officia language of the upper class, and explained that his nephew was both deaf and dumb, though willing for all that to be enrolled as a member of the Silver Shoe.

This explanation, it appeared, was accepted without dispute; for, upon a sudden, the president clapped his hands by way of a signal that the ceremony should begin Immediately, the fat man ascended the steps to the dais, and passed beyond the chair in which the Red Button mandarin was seated, and drew back a curtain that was suspended at the back, disclosing three monstrous painted images.

"Behold the Great Ones of the Earth!" he cried. "Confucius, Buddha and Lao Tze "

There followed a silence, broken only by the persistent ringing of a small brass bel at the far end of the room. When the be ceased, the fat man continued.

"By one or all of the Three Religions," h declared, "you must swear loyalty to th Silver Shoe. The price of infidelity death."

A chair was brought for the mandarin Lu-wei; but the other two were bidden to remain standing, whilst the president addressed them.

IN A deep voice that was scarcely raised above a murmur, yet which carried to all parts of the room, the mandarin, sitting motionless in his high-backed chair, delivered himself of a long oration that was typically Chinese.

It contained much in connection with the wisdom of their ancestors and the writings of the sages. He preached the doctrine of China for the Chinese, from the Great Wall to Canton. They would purge the land of foreign-devils that they might revive the ancient glories of the past, the palmy days of the Chins.

There followed a ceremony somewhat tedious. Raikes by reason of his supposed affliction was ignored; but both Archer and the doctor had to repeat, word for word after the fat man, a long-winded oath in which was frequent mention of Yen Wang, the devil-god, and other evil spirits, seven-armed and seven-eyed.

Being then considered in a fit state to be admitted into the fraternity, they were asked which of them would first receive the branding-iron.

Raikes, who had not been able to understand a word of what had been said, was by this time thoroughly bored. During the taking of the oath, he had showed signs of growing restless, and had with difficulty refrained from yawning. But now, seeing that one of them was requested to step forward, he did so without hesitation, little dreaming what was in store for him.

The fat man made signs to him to strip himself to the waist; and this he did with some reluctance, though devoutly grateful to the doctor for having stained the whole of his body the same colour as his face.

He got the shock of his life, however, when he saw the fat man take an iron from the charcoal fire; while at the same time another official approached, carrying a porcelain jar.

For a minute MacKinnon feared that Raikes was going to resist; but he suffered the ordeal without flinching and without a murmur. The red-hot iron stabbed his arm, a little below the shoulder, the pain of the operation being in some sort relieved by a dab of grease from the jar that contained a black ointment which, as they afterwards discovered, had a singular effect: it gave the subsequent scar, which was in the shape of a Chinese shoe, a silvery appearance.

At the time, there was nothing to be seen but a red, ugly blister. Raikes was informed by means of signs that he could seat himself on one of the benches; and this he did with a sigh of relief, settling down as comfortably as he could, as if resolved to enjoy the discomfiture of his two friends.

Randal Archer received the branding-iron as a matter of course; and then, to the astonishment of Raikes, the doctor was seen to hesitate. The last man in the world to prove a coward, yet he looked about him quickly, as if he sought some method of escape.

The fat man, who was a kind of master of the ceremonies in that strange assembly, told him to disrobe.

The mandarin, Lu-wei, threw off his mandarin's cloak, and drew back the sleeve of the short silken jacket that he wore beneath.

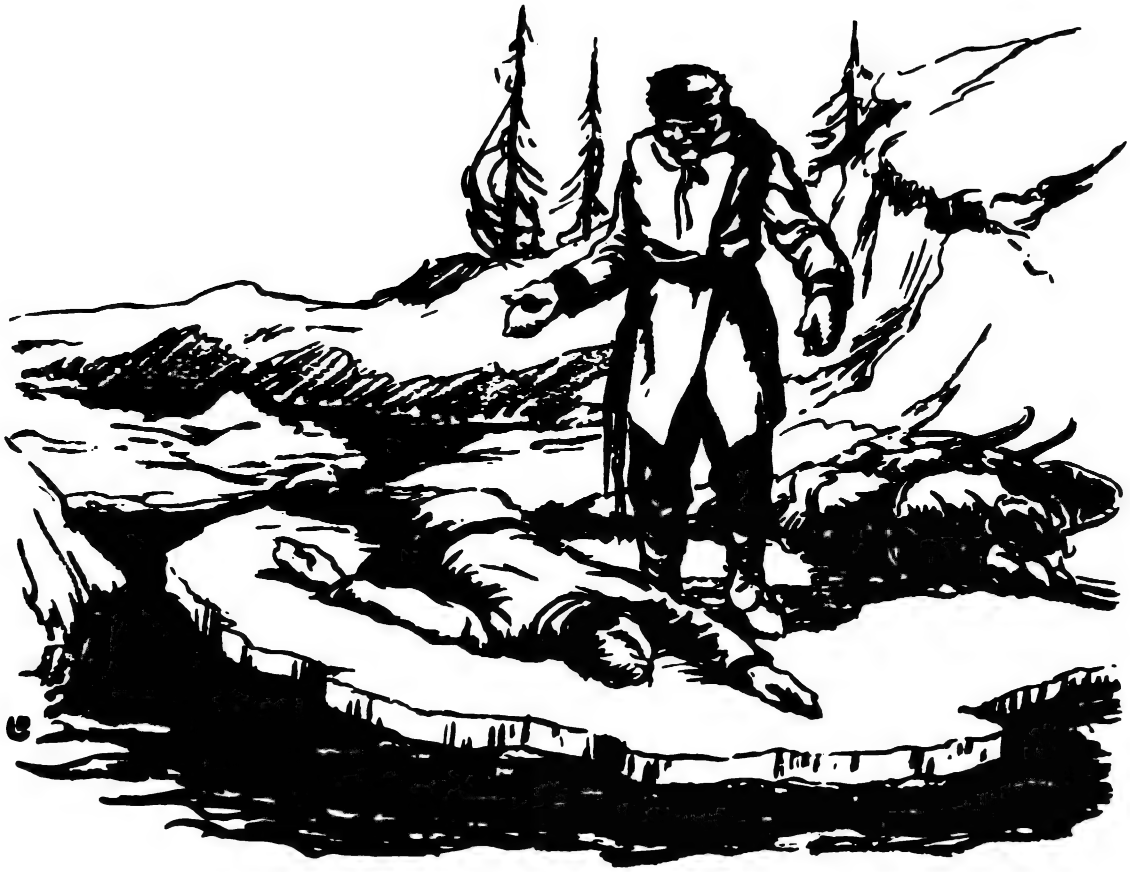
He was told by the president that that was not enough; and after faltering again, he flung off the jacket and stood before them naked to the waist. Across his left shoulder and his back were the scars where the cave tiger had mauled him.

One could see the quivering of the great muscles on his arms when the red-hot branding-iron was laid upon his skin. At that moment, a loud voice was lifted in a kind of shout from the far end of the room; and a man in a long white coat came running forward, toward the president, with both arms extended. He was so excited that, when he came to a standstill, he found it difficult to speak.

"Hold!" he cried. "He who stands before you was never Lu-wei, or any other mandarin in all Yunnan!"

Though the speaker wore a green mask like all the others, his voice betrayed him as Tong, the doctor's compradore.

In the following chapters Archer and Raikes, while trying to help MacKinnon, come in conflict with the leader of the society.



CHAPTER I

RED GOLD

CRUSTY BALLOU was no believer in miracles. Eight years spent wholly in the Klondike had relieved him of nearly all the optimism he had brought to the North at the age of thirty, and soured the credulity which is the natural equipment of a goldseeker. Searing heat and bitter cold, swarms of mosquitoes and gnats in summer, wolverenes and gaunt wolves on the winter barrens, backbreaking labor, famine and disappointment—all these had toughened his hide, hardened the twinkle in his deep set eyes of greenish gray to a light of derision, and sharpened his tongue. There was no doubt at all that his disposition had turned darker and become netted with fine cracks like a weathered walrus tusk; but when other men hinted that he had "missed too many boats"—that is, had become cracked of brain as well as disposition—they were wrong.

Crusty morosely sought no friendships; never wasted the little gold he secured on gambling and very little of it on whisky. Except in case of direst necessity, he did not believe in grubstakes of the sort which are doled out by pasty faced bartenders for assignments of half shares in the rich strikes sometimes to be made. Crusty worked at day labor when he was broke; or when work was scarce he tramped up by himself toward The Dome, on the headwaters of the ironically named Too Much Gold Creek, snared rabbits, perhaps shot a caribou, and lived on a straight meat diet until he had grubbed a new stake from a cheap but fairly reliable "Chinaman placer" which he knew.

So when a fresh faced, blond haired young chechako, came racing into the shanty town of Kowak, *sans* outfit, bearing a poke containing a small handful of queer looking nuggets, Crusty Ballou paid as little attention as any of the other seasoned sourdoughs. The newcomer claimed to have made a strike over in the little explored Gauches Lakes region; and that stamped him as a liar from the start. No one ever had found gold anywhere near as far east as that and no one ever would. The formation was not right.

The young fellow called himself Bill Nelson and was reticent enough concerning facts, as of course he would be. What he

A Novelette
of Man's Brutality to Man
in the Gold Fields of the North

Pudding Stone

By ANTHONY M. RUD

wanted was a partner and an outfit, he said—a veteran prospector conversant with Canadian mining law and who knew something of the country to eastward. A hardrock man, if there was one.

Asking for a hardrock mining man in the placer region of Kowak was ridiculous enough in itself. Down along Quartz Creek and No-Name there might be a few, working bench claims or sinking prospect holes in the hillsides, but from The Dome to the Klondike River all the talk was of pans, cradles, long-toms and sluices. They put Bill Nelson down as either a simpleton or a crook. Once out in the region of the Gauches Lakes, a trusting partner could easily enough be murdered and the outfit appropriated. Supposing that over at Dawson or Forty-Mile they were looking for a man answering the description of Bill Nelson; would a fugitive have any better chance then to make eastward through the lake region and the mountains, to the Pelly River, or perhaps the Mackenzie? At Fort Good Hope on the old Hudson's Bay Company route, he would be able to obtain steamer transportation, or to be carried either direction by canoe.

At the Bedrock Saloon in Kowak, Crusty cast eyes upon Bill Nelson for the first time. The youth was trying to argue with Tug McArdle, who sold chips for the various games of chance when any were in operation; and in the interim engaged in two-handed stud poker with anyone foolish enough to buck his game, or laid out game after game of clock solitaire for his own practice and amusement.

"Not a damn' cent!" snarled Tug contemptuously in answer to some low voiced query. "Hell, that ain't gold!" His fat jowls waggled menacingly. "Get away!"

"But I tell you it *is* gold!" came the clear, boyish voice of the newcomer. He bent forward over the table in his impatient earnestness. "If you men in a gold country can't tell the difference between nugget gold and copper pyrites—"

Smash!

He got no further. Unnoted, the gambler's hands had gone beneath the table. One short forearm suddenly shot upward and out, brass glinting upon the knuckles. The armored fist landed upon Bill Nelson's right cheekbone and nose.

It was a brutal blow, all the worse because entirely unexpected. The blond haired youth was jolted upright, an expression of shocked surprise upon his regular, almost womanish features.

The jar of it had got to his brain, however, as Tug McArdle fully intended it should. Bill Nelson staggered and fell backward into the filthy sawdust. His head came down almost between the feet of Crusty Ballou, where the latter sat smoking his pipe, chair tilted back.

TILL that moment Ballou had been a spectator, entirely indifferent. One glance down into that upturned youthful face, disfigured now by an ugly bruise, twin streams of blood from the nostrils and by a chilly, terrible fury which had come into the widened eyes of pure deep blue, and something turned a backflip in the mind of the veteran sourdough. He saw the dazed boy getting up, saw the big, capable hands clutching at the sawdust—unclenching—

But more than that Crusty Ballou saw the toad bodied Tug seated sneeringly at the table, hands thrust into the capacious and bulging pockets of his checkered vest. Tug could afford to wait. He was the banker of games and therefore armed. Any assault upon him could be construed as an attempt at robbery.

With a swift motion Crusty was on his feet the chair kicked aside. "Hold it, both of yuh" he commanded crisply. As if materialized from the air, a big revolver had leaped into his right hand. The muzzle held a line midway between Tug's succession of chins and the stained green card table cloth. With his left hand Crusty had the blond hair of the youth clutched warningly.

"He's got two derringers there, yuh young fool!" spat out Crusty. "Stay where yuh are!

"Then as far as *yo're* consarned, Tug McArdle, stand up! Do it slow an' easy! Take yore hands outa them pockets or I'll nick off them ugly fryin' pans yuh think are ears! All right. Hands up high an' walk out here! Good. I'll jest take them two mankillers." He released his grip on young Nelson, and lifted out, one by one, a brace of six-inch, .41 caliber double barreled derringers from the fat man's waistcoat pockets, dropping them unconcernedly in the sawdust.

The gambler's face was chalk white with repressed fury. "I'll kill you for this!" he promised huskily.

"Mebbeso," nodded the saturnine faced prospector with no trace of alarm. "I'm pointin' out that this hyar statement of yores has got witnesses a-plenty," he added with significance, glancing around the saloon. "Takin' that, with yore general reputation hereabouts, I ain't tremblin' none about what a miners' meetin' 'll say, come one of these days I have to scotch a snake!

"But afore I figure what I better do, lessee what sorta stuff this was yuh called copper pyrite. Nelson, see if yuh can pick up two-three of them nuggets where they was spilt. Yeah. Put 'em on the bar."

Nonchalantly thrusting the Colt into an open spring clip, sewed to the inside of his leather vest under the left armpit, Ballou turned to examine the first pair of nuggets retrieved from the sawdust.

A single glance showed him what doubtless had deceived Tug McArdle. The gold which was weighed out in the scales of the Bedrock bar or gaming tables ordinarily, was dull yellow stuff, well nigh lusterless. For most part too, it was "dust," fine grained, sandlike particles, mixed with shreds of "flake." Here were two fairly large nuggets; each about the size of a smallish hazelnut and of an exceedingly peculiar reddish hue!

Ballou drew out his sheath knife and stabbed the point into one nugget to test the softness. The sharp point went straight through, almost bisecting the nugget. And the color showed constant. Then he dropped one of the nuggets for a few minutes on the red hot lid of the stove. No odor of sulphur arose, as would have been the case with copper or iron pyrites.

"Wa-al, it's gold, an' no mistake; but it ain't like none I've seen washed, an' I've tried 'em all from El Dorado to Injun River," he pronounced finally. "Son, yuh better stake a claim right quick on this here sawdust. I'll buy what yuh pan out, if nobody else wants it. Bein' as I've seen some gold this color, down to the old Feather River diggin's—"

He stopped suddenly, launching a swift backward kick with one heavy boot, then instantly leaping to one side to flip out again the big Colt revolver with that blurry motion, too swift for the eye to follow with any accuracy. Unknown to the enraged gambler, a combination of front and side mirrors had presented Crusty Ballou with a picture of what went on even at his very feet, where normally the marred cherry bar would have acted as a screen.

Tug McArdle, knowing that three of his own sycophants were present in the small assemblage in the Bedrock, had taken what seemed like an easy chance. Restraining a grunt he went down stealthily for his pair of derringers. Just as his chubby fingers closed upon them and he looked up with an expression of triumphant hate on his countenance, the weight of a heavy boot struck glancingly against the side of his head.

Ballou had almost missed a kick which, had it landed squarely, could have crushed the gambler's forehead. But Tug, although dazed, knew—or thought he knew—that this was a showdown. Blinking through his small, piggy eyes, he jerked up one derringer and fired.

Bystanders could not have sworn from the sound that two shots had been fired, so closely had the *crack* of the Colt .45 blended with the thunder of the short barreled, bulldog weapon. Yet there in the long bar glass, back and above the left shoulder of the half crouching Crusty Ballou, was a star of one central hole and radiating cracks, looking quite as though someone had struck the expensive plate with the pickax side of a mattock.

And down there on the floor, pinned quickly and ferociously by young Bill Nelson—who had recovered enough to leap and yell inarticulately even as the powder was burned—was a squirming, whimpering mass of fat, Tug McArdle. Three of the knuckles had been smashed away from his precious right hand, the hand with which he performed all his stock in trade of card tricks, like the Charlemagne little finger pass.

Tug was no coward; professional gamblers playing the gold camps, on the contrary, had to be possessed of a rather exceptional and coldblooded sort of courage, which had nothing to do with their being bullies, or the reverse. In this moment of pain and frustrated fury Tug thought far more about his smashed hand than he did of what further might happen to him. In fact, little worse could happen as he saw it. Never again would he deal cards cleverly, or produce a royal straight flush from his cherished Kepplinger holdout.

But they pulled Bill Nelson from his throat and let Tug live. For an antiseptic, whisky was swashed over his shattered hand, and it was bound tightly to stop the blood. With any sort of luck the gambler would recover completely in a few weeks. Then, of course, he would have to go to work, unless he had managed to salt away enough of a stake to take him outside. Few of his class, working on percentage with the saloon owners, ever had much they could call their own.

CHAPTER II

AN UNWILLING PARDNER

FROM that hour Crusty Ballou was left even more to himself by the miners of the Kowak district. Rifles they understood and used exceedingly well when occasion arose, but revolvers were rarely carried. On the whole they were law abiding men who made and enforced most of their own law. Fights were frequent enough, but they were brawls of the knock-down-dragout variety where boots and fists and teeth were the favored weapons. Occasionally two men who had come to hate each other to the death, fought it out with knives, or held a duel at longer range with Winchesters. That was proper enough, of course. But that one of their number, a short tempered old sourdough, should wield a "hogleg" in the manner of a gunfighter of the Yankee Southwest, set him apart—and not flatteringly, either.

One thing they did not know about Crusty was the fact that a straightforward, knockabout life spent among many sorts of men had taught him proficiency in the use of many weapons. His creed could be expressed in the two words, "even break." He no more would have thought of using that blue barrelled Colt upon an unarmed man, however menacing, than he had hesitated in shooting away the knuckles of the derringer armed, pig-slow gambler.

While Bill Nelson was retrieving the rest of his red nuggets from the bar floor, Crusty turned and stepped forth into the night. With backing, the chechako did not need to fear further baiting for the time being; and what Crusty wanted least in the world was effusive gratitude. By and by, if no one else claimed the fool kid's gold, Crusty would be glad to exchange worn bills for it. The reddish metal would do for a sort of reminder of other days, when he had been more consistently lucky.

Not that he was broke at present. By sheer good fortune, while working his despised Chinaman placer for a stake, he had come upon a small but rich isolated pocket in the stream's bedrock. Cleaning this to the last grain, he had taken out nearly thirty ounces of dust, in addition to the seven or eight ounces garnered more laboriously over a long period. The weather was getting bitter, with blister ice along the shore of the creek each morning. Panning under water soon would be impossible.

Since old Seneca Marble, a sluiceman with a fair paying claim on Too Much Gold Creek lower down, had offered him work thawing and piling the gravel against the time water ran again, Crusty had decided to take things easy for a few days in Kowak. That was why he had been there, lazing around. Just as sure as fate old Seneca's pleurisy pains would come into his chest before the first sweeping blizzard; and then he would set up a yell for Crusty. From then on Seneca would spend most of his time with red flannel swathings on his throat and chest, poked up as close as he could get to a pink bellied Yukon stove, four-point blankets over his thin, shivering legs, and a bottle of painkiller within easy reach. And the hardier Ballou would take over Seneca's "porcupine boiler"—an unwieldy but fairly efficient steam making contrivance with "points" for inserting in the gravel to be thawed—and shovel for the duration of the winter, piling up a long mound of gold bearing gravel where it could be shoveled easily into the sluice, come spring.

This night, being far from sure concerning possible retaliation by two or three men who hung about the Bedrock Saloon and who were known to be friends of Tug McArdle, Crusty did not go to his own rented bunk. Instead, he hoofed it through the inch of light snow, down the creek to the stanch cabin where dwelt his prospective employer. Seneca probably wanted him, and he might as well start. Three dollars a day and keep through the cold months would allow him to cache his own grubstake intact, and even increase it a little. The only thing he disliked about the arrangement was the fact that evenings, until he fell asleep from fatigue, he would be compelled to play interminable games of "Sixty-Six" with his employer. But for months that would be Seneca's sole diversion.

Crusty reached the shack, knocked sharply, then pulled the latch thong. The door opened reluctantly; caulkings of cloth had been thrust in cracks.

"Close it quick!" came a wheezed command. "What the hell d'ye want anyhow? Oh, it's Ballou, heh?"

"Shakedown," answered the newcomer laconically, bending to replace the cloth strips so no vestige of cold air could enter. Seneca, as he had expected, was crouched up against the stove, a mummy wound in Hudson's Bay blankets. "Got in some trouble down to the saloon."

"Ye did?" The elder man's brows corrugated in a frown of quick anxiety. "Who with?"

"Tug McArdle. Shot his gun hand," elucidated Crusty. "Thought mebbe his friends might take it into their heads to come after me, once I got asleep."

Seneca wheezed in unfeigned alarm. "Then ye cain't stay here!" he cackled shrilly. "Ain't no use astin'! I won't hire the likes of ye for a cent a day! I won't have no shooters hereabouts! Nossir!"

"Oh, yuh go sit on a tack!" snapped Crusty contemptuously. "Here I am, an' here I stay till mornin'. S'pose yuh sit an' hold that sawed-off shotgun on the door. Anybody comes, blow his head off. Hell, I wouldn't work for an old fool like yuh if yuh give me yore whole damn' claim! Now, go ahead an' worry; me, I'm goin' to sleep."

With that he took up a pair of the blankets lying about in profusion about the shake floor, wrapped the folds about him, and rolled over behind the stove. The fact that the only air that entered the tight cabin came down the tin chimney to the stove, bothered him not at all. He was used to such accommodations. In three minutes he was snoring.

"WELL, ain't he the gold-rammed limit?" questioned Seneca, of no one in particular. He shook his unkempt head. "But I'll be damned if I'll hire 'im! Nossir! I kin git Budge Allen; he ain't no good, but there shore ain't no fellers waitin' to stick a knife in 'im or shoot 'im up!"

Budge was the town no-account, a derelict swamper and odd job man who did no steady work at all save in winter, when it was work or starve. A couple of dollars a day and keep would satisfy, and overpay, him.

Seneca continued to mumble and squeak to himself, but it did not matter to Crusty, who slept as soundly and thoroughly as if he had not done himself out of a comfortable winter's job, through nothing more than a too personal interest in the affairs of a fool chechako.

Crusty went back to Kowak in the morning. He had no other place to go, unless he trudged out to one of the other cabins and braced some miner for a job in double harness.

Before Crusty had smoked many pipes over the situation, Bill Nelson found him. "I been looking for you," said the young man, smiling a little diffidently.

"Oh, yeah. All right. I'll take yore gold. How much does it weigh?" replied Crusty ungraciously between puffs, frowning as he recalled his promise.

"No, not for that. After—after what you said, they cashed it for me quick enough. I—" The youth hesitated, and his voice lowered. "I didn't tell them quite all the truth about this strike of mine," he confessed naively.

"Anybody up an' accuse yuh thataway?" Crusty's retort was dry; yet it was just possible that the ironic glint in the depths of his squinted eyes was a shade less caustic than it might have been in regarding one of his own thirty-third degree lodge of Alaskan sourdoughs.

"No, they haven't. In fact I know they think I'm lying. I don't know much of anything about Alaska—"

"Yo're in the Yukon now."

"Well, the Yukon, of course. By the wildest sort of good luck, and because I happen to know a little bit about geology, I have made what I honestly think to be a tremendous strike! I'd like to tell you more about it. I—I played the roulette wheel last night and I have quite a little more money than I had; but that doesn't solve my problem. I have to have a partner—"

"Pardner!" growled Crusty disapprovingly.

"Yes, a pardner!" The youth could smile, an instant flash of acknowledgment. "A man just like yourself; able to take care of himself, one who has been here some time, is worth a lot more to me right now than a half share in—say—a million dollars!"

"Hmph!" growled Crusty. Even if the skies had fallen and the young fool had made a tolerable strike, talk of a million revealed just how little he knew. Why, outside of Treadwell, and a couple of fabulous grants on Bonanza and El Dorado—

For an instant a glint of white fire showed in the depths of Bill Nelson's blue eyes. But it was gone, and he grinned again. "I can convince you, *pardner*!" he retorted. "The only thing I'm asking right now is a chance to talk privately for fifteen minutes. Is there any place we can go?"

"Nope." Crusty was discouragingly adamant.

But the young chechako, although he began to flush across his cheeks and temples, had come from one of the stubborn northern breeds—"Swede, or mebbe Skandahoovian" as one other miner had guessed it half contemptuously. "Look here!" he said without raising his voice, but planting his moccasined feet wider before Crusty. "I'll *buy* fifteen minutes of your darned valuable time! What's it worth? I won more than five hundred dollars last night—" He unsnapped a heavy moosehide poke of dust from his belt and thunked it across the palm of his left hand.

"Sonny," and Crusty's chair came down to four legs with a dull thump in the sawdust, "d'yuh mean to stand there an' tell me yuh jest wandered into this man's country, all alone an' not even packin' a pan, an' made a big strike?"

"Of course not. I came with two Indians; I did not expect to do any mining of any sort. I was sent by the Imperial Cartographers of Ottawa, to—"

"Cart—which?"

"Mapmakers. I am a preliminary survey scout—or was, till I resigned. The job of preparing a rough sketch map of unsurveyed lands in this region is utterly beyond the powers of any one person. I had sense enough to resign."

"Where'd yuh come from?" Crusty was conducting his own inquisition now, regardless of custom in the country. He knew this chechako would not resent straightforward questioning.

"Ottawa, Calgary, Edmonton, Athabasca Landing, Fort Smith, Fort Resolution, then down the Great River to the portage at Good Hope. Then overland—here."

"Well, yuh don't call it the Mackenzie River, anyway," admitted the sourdough grudgingly, metioning a point which had become a sort of shibboleth among oldtimers. They, for most part, had no knowledge of the original Mac in whose honor the Great River had been renamed. "Who were the Injuns?" Crusty's eyes narrowed dangerously. This was the test; at one time or another the prospector had run into most of the native packbearers and guides who took parties from Good Hope or MacPherson over here into the gold region. He believed that he knew them all, though each season he ran into a few new faces.

"Ah-Na-Kee and Bert Big Nose," replied Nelson without hesitation. "Both of them were of the Tagish tribe—came from down near the Greasy Lakes, they said."

The elder man looked his question. "I knew 'em both; they used to pack for Con Yukon. Where are they now?"

"Dead. Smallpox."

"Huh!" Crusty puffed strainingly at his pipe, which had gone out. "So they died on yuh—an' then yuh come right on in, not worryin' about what happened to Kowak, or nothin'. That it?"

"I had been vaccinated. I stayed with them and then waited three weeks more before I came, taking precautions in regard to washing my clothes many times. I cached the outfit in an out of the way place where nobody is likely to find it—"

"Or touch it, even if they do!" broke in Ballou dryly. "Youngster, this is the North! But I been through the sickness four-five years back. I'll take a chance on selling yuh fifteen of my vallyble minutes, mebbe. We might go back into Steve's office; he ain't there right now." Crusty arose, tapping the dottle from his pipe. He grunted forbiddingly, reaching again for his tobacco pouch.

"And your price?" demanded Nelson, still belligerent to a certain degree.

"Hunh! Wa-al, I reckon one drink of belly-scorcher at the bar'd about square us," decided Crusty after a moment's pause, turning toward the marred cherry to conceal a grin which had leapt unwelcome to the depths of his eyes.

CHAPTER III

THE LURE

THERE was a little round table, marred by the burns of many cheroots, cigarettes and many glasses of spilled liquor, in Steve Ingram's "office." There were eight chairs and no other furniture, save two carryalls for poker chips, dropped in a corner and half covered with a square of caribou hide. In some measure the layout was deceiving; tremendous business, time and again, in the exchange and sale—and winning—of good gold claims had been consummated here. But this night there was no bluffing, no deception, though Crusty Ballou lighted a new pipe, puffed, grunted disparagingly every now and then, and watched for it.

"The strike I made isn't the sort of gold beposit you and the others here are used to working," said Nelson without preamble. "It isn't placer gravel—now, at any rate—and it isn't ore, exactly."

"Huh?" Crusty was both puzzled and surprised. "What in time d'yuh name it then, when it's home?" he drawled.

"Well, perhaps it would have to be called ore. You know conglomerate, of course—droken down goldbearing quartz or calc spar?"

Crusty puffed and nodded. "Break it in yore fingers, sometimes."

"Yes. Well, once upon a time this possibly may have been conglomerate—ages ago, you understand—that is, if pressure and heat somehow were applied to it later. I call it 'pudding stone,' because as near as I can judge from book descriptions, it looks exactly like the auriferous 'banket' of the South African gold fields. Their familiar name for the banket is "pudding stone," because of the way nuggets are stuck in it like raisins in a plum pudding."

"Hmph," growled the sourdough skeptically.

Nelson was deadly serious now, however. His blue eyes glinted, yet he kept to the same even tone. "There is this difference: the South African pudding stone is full of ground up shell, it was once a sea beach. This ledge, or outcrop—and the Lord only knows what the extent of it may be!—was formed, I believe, by a big fresh water river of antiquity. The river somehow was diverted from its course. An earthquake or something like that, buried in the gold deposits and other materials, pressing them together and in time making a crumbly kind of rock studded with nuggets, like raisins in a pudding.

Crusty had about enough of this chechako's fairy tale. When he, Ballou, went prospecting he aimed to discover placer gold or jewelry ore somewhere. Sandstone puddings with golden raisins—huh! "How come yuh found it, if it was buried so deep?" he queried impatiently. "No, it don't sound like sense to me, fella. I ain't going to pick no fight, sonny, but I want yuh should jest let me out. It ain't my kinda prospectin', an' I don't aim to change now. Once I could set eyes on this sorta stuff, myself, I s'pose I'd be different, but I ain't seen it—an' never will!"

An ominous, stubborn set had come to young Nelson's jaw. "You're going to see it, *some* of it, just as I broke it off the outcrop, before you're two minutes older!" he retorted. "Wait right there, darn you, or I'll crawl your frame, even if you do wear a gun!"

With that he flung out into the saloon, slamming the door. Crusty stared, frowning; but then he allowed himself the luxury of a grim chuckle, leaned back and cocked his heavy moccasins on the rim of the marred table. "Shore acts like he believed it hisself," he growled aloud. "Wa-al, *I* don't! But somehow I ain't anxious to tangle with him—gettin' old, I reckon." He held up one knotty fist, clenching it, examining it critically.

It would have caused this veteran of the North to gasp in unqualified astonishment had anyone told him just then that this "beardless youth" was a man to whom considerable responsibility had been given; that he was twenty-eight, lacking just two years of the age at which the hardbitten Crusty himself had braved the rigors of Chilkoot Pass and risked his life in the lather and spume of Miles Canyon, to reach the Land of Gold.

But no one did. And when the time arrived that such confidences were exchanged, Crusty had seen enough of manhood in the other—a white glinting fire like moonlight on the swords of Eskelstuna steel wielded by the blond pardner's forebears under Gustavus Adolphus—that he did not dream of questioning the statement.

Nelson returned as abruptly as he had departed. He flung across the table the striped, wool lined mackinaw he had worn. It struck with a muffled thump. He turned it open to the lining, jerked out a knife, and cut through some black linen bastings in the middle of the back.

Dropping the knife, he tore away the lengths of thread, thrust in his hand, and drew forth a soft chamois skin bag, large, almost circular, and almost flat. It would just about have accommodated a small sized dinner plate of cheap porcelain or earthenware, though its present load was irregular in all dimensions.

Nelson pushed that into the hands of Crusty, and swept the mackinaw sidewise to the floor. "*There's* your pudding stone!" he snapped. "Look at it!"

Crusty puffed at his pipe, apparently unmoved. He turned over the bag, it was evidently the work of an outsider; nothing like the triple-sewed moosehide pokes used for treasure pokes by real prospectors. Hide of a baby fawn, Crusty supposed, never having heard of chamois. It looked as though it had been machine stitched. The sourdough probably would have had a fatal spasm then and there had he guessed that, not long before, this covering had protected as effeminate an article as a silver backed hand mirror.

But Crusty was doing his gruff best to conceal the fact that this yellow haired chechako's stubborn sincerity at last had got under his skin. He stalled. Very leisurely he plucked at the purse string which held closed the mouth of the bag. It came wide open. Crusty reached in gingerly. His thumb and first finger closed upon something hard and thin. He drew it out.

There on the table before him lay a flakelike, irregular piece of sandy rock, studded with queer, projecting lumps. Most of the lumps were covered over; others showed through a dull reddish color. In effect, the specimen resembled peanut brittle candy more than anything else easily comparable.

Through the ordeal of slowness imposed by Crusty, Bill Nelson had stood back from the table, hands at his sides, a little rigid, but uncompromising. He had presented the ultimate in his evidence and stood demanding to be judged, confident of himself.

TO CRUSTY BALLOU had come the staggering revelation of his own ignorance, not to the chechako. Crusty looked down at the flakelike fragment, touched his roughened finger to the excrescences—and tried with the best of his somewhat restricted imagination to conceive how this bit of rock could have been manufactured by any man, salted—in its present form. He could not. There was a half shown nugget of "Feather River gold"

—thus he had called it earlier—looking up at him from a single red eye. A big nugget, too. Gosh, this one, when chipped away from the crumbly rock, would go almost as big as a pecan, and about the same long, narrow shape.

Crusty's hand went down to his belt, coming up with his sheath knife; that tool of all purposes. "Mind if I cut in an' chip one of 'em?" he queried in a voice suddenly gone husky with incredulity and excitement.

"That's what I brought it for," said Bill Nelson. "Help yourself!"

During ensuing minutes Crusty Ballou worked on the scission of pudding stone as carefully as a lapidary with a fine jewel. He chipped one small nugget from its place, looked at it, speared it as he once before had speared such an offering, with his knife. And then stared at the same sort of red gold he had seen at the bar.

He went further. He tasted grains of the matrix, grated them between his teeth; spat them out. He had one nugget, the size of a split pea, to look at, weigh in his hand. He weighed it, jiggling it back and forth in his palm. The color of gold fever was mounting in his face, though he did not know it. Breath taking as this was, he was beginning to believe the incredible, impossible tale told by this chechako blunderer into the Northland!

"There is—this kinda rock, yuh say? Lots of it?" Crusty growled. Even when his pulse was mounting, his skin crawling with the overpowering stampede itch, he could not be gracious. Tact simply was not in him.

"I have said about all I shall say," returned Bill Nelson. "I have a rough sketch map here, which tells where there is more of that you have in your hands—but I don't know the landmarks which will bring me back to the points I can recognize. Speak up when you are ready. Take a chance with me—though more than likely you will be able to recognize the outstanding landmarks I noted down on the homeward trip—or else step out once and for all—and say nothing. I think I have the right to ask one or the other of you. Particularly as I am proposing to pay for a full half of the outfit to start—and also, because I have a cache out there, solidly frozen by now. You, as my partner—pardner, I mean—could use it without fear, as you have had smallpox."

"Y-yuh say yuh have a map?"

"Yes."

"Let's see it! I—"

"Not until you say yes or no. I will take your word as something better than gold."

"Well, yuh have it!" snapped Crusty. "I'm sold, damn' fool or not! I'll go yuh, fifty-fifty, an' buy the outfit; that's my share. Mebbe, if the dogs cost too much, yuh'll have to kitty in some. I dunno. But I wanta say one thing. If yo're tryin' a game on me, yuh better pick some better fella! I believe yuh, durn if I don't! But if I—"

"Then it won't cost you anything to smoke me up," returned Bill Nelson evenly. "I don't carry a short gun at all—and you do. Hell, pardner, what say we go out and climb the brass rail for a drink?"

"Just one—no more," stipulated Crusty grimly. "I've seen stampedes go bust on likker afore now; an' if I'm helpin' *lead* this one, whisky ain't what I need under my belt."

"Make it a bottle of champagne, then," grinned Bill Nelson, who was trying his best to conceal the sky-ceiling quality of his exuberance.

"Wa-al, one bottle. I ain't never tasted that stuff, an' mebbe this is my chance," reluctantly conceded Crusty Ballou.

In the doorway they jostled, it seemed by chance. But Bill Nelson confronted his new pardner. "Shake with me, darn you," he cried. "I don't want all the barflies to see."

For one long second Crusty looked at him, then gripped the broad, strong hand offered. And winced at the pressure.

"See yuh make good!" said Crusty hoarsely. For seven years he had not had a real pardner; two having double crossed him within the third year of his stay north. "I—I don't mean—the gold—"

The blue eyes of the blond man held his unwaveringly. "I think I know what you mean," said Bill Nelson slowly. "We're going out where there aren't any secrets, you and I. We'll make it, pardner!"

Crusty grumbled in his five day beard. "I hope to hell—wa-al, le's try it once. I'll get the stake."

"Where are you sleeping, pardner?" asked Bill Nelson. "I've got a double bed, such as it is."

"We'll double up tonight," agreed Crusty, frowning quite as if this would be a hardship. "Hell, by tomorrow night I'll have the outfit. We'll be on the trail!"

CHAPTER IV

THE LOST NUGGET

CRUSTY underrated the notoriety he had achieved through the gunplay which had overthrown the gambler, Tug McArdle. Whereas a week before he might have drunk raspberry pop with a cross-eyed Chinaman, without occasioning more than derisive comment, all Kowak viewed him sidewise now. He was a gunslinger and short tempered, and therefore good to let alone. But as a curiosity, he also was interesting to watch. All the sourdoughs knew something concerning Bill Nelson's wild tale. Likewise they had decided with Crusty, that this nugget gold never had been panned in this district of the North. But when the least approachable old-timer of them all, who was not supposed to be rolling in wealth, either, came out—after a long session in Steve Ingram's office—and quaffed champagne with the despised chechako on terms of tolerance, he made himself only a trifle less conspicuous than would have been a pink striped monkey hanging by the tail from the acetylene lamp.

Tug McArdle was not there, naturally, as he was nursing a shattered hand that showed disturbing symptoms of infection. But an undersized, ratty featured tinhorn named Sammie Seever was present, his beady little black eyes missing nothing in which there might be a profit for him.

Sammie arrived at a breath taking conclusion concerning the conference and its result, before anyone else in the Bedrock Saloon tumbled to it. He scurried out and five minutes later was closeted with the pale faced, vindictive Tug McArdle, chattering out surmises concerning a new, unbelievably rich strike.

For his information—not his guesswork, which Tug was amply able to supply for himself—he received five silver dollars, and a message to be taken to a pair of bullies sometimes employed as bouncers at the Bedrock. Tug, propping himself up on one elbow, his beefy countenance contorted with vindictive fury, also commanded Sammie to keep an eye on certain possible activities of Bill Nelson and Crusty. More five dollar doles would be forthcoming in case Sammie uncovered anything to substantiate this interesting but inconclusive news.

The little tinhorn protested. He never had been paid in this niggardly fashion on other occasions when he had made himself useful to the gambler. He wanted fifty bucks, not five. But Tug cut him short with a sneer. Tug, none too well heeled himself, considering what he faced, would plunge to the extent of his stack for sweet vengeance upon Crusty Ballou; but there was little money to be spent on mere hypotheses and hopes.

"Get me a plan of what they're goin' to do—snoop around an' listen, you little rat—and I'll slip you your fifty!" promised Tug with a growl. "Now, go send Mose Ahrens and Lefty Hazlett here to me."

Sammie obeyed. If he could have double crossed the disabled gambler in any way to his own profit, and without danger, he would have done so; but Sammie was afraid, besides, these two husky thugs would be working for Tug. Even five silver dollars were to be preferred to a broken neck.

So with no more delay than that time required for the tossing of a couple of drinks, taken in anticipation of largesse for some dirty job from Tug, Mose and Lefty, who had been found fitfully snoring out the tail end of a two day jag, came to heel like a pair of stodgy, sullen hounds. The drinks wakened them somewhat, however. They could listen, expressions of the lowest variety of cunning on their countenances. They supposed some fool had outlucked Tug, and made away with a sizeable winning at stud in spite of the alternate hands which were stacked by the gambler. It had happened twice. Each time they had been called upon to retrieve the loss suffered.

"D'we kill 'im, or jes' knock 'im on the conk, this time?" questioned the black browed, heavy set Mose sneeringly. " 'Member, a killin' costs double."

Tug regarded them with eyes that held the light of a detached anger not for them. "If things pan out, you can have my pile—about three hundred apiece—all I've got, anyway," he said in a husky voice. His uninjured left hand opened, then slowly clenched as though it was squeezing something. "I suspect that this damn' fool Bill Nelson—that chechako, you know—really did make some kind of a strike! He's got the man I want to get, out there drinkin' shampaggny water with him right now!"

"Crusty Ballou, yuh mean?" questioned Lefty, after an interchange of glances with his partner.

"That's him!" grated Tug.

"Uh-huh. Well, thanks a lot," snarled Lefty, getting to his feet and sidling somewhat unsurely toward the door. "We heard a-plenty jes' now about what thet jigger done. If yuh mean Mose an' me is to—"

"Hold up; let me talk a while!" bade Tug peremptorily, motioning Lefty back to the vacated seat. "If I was going to ask you to make a standup fight with that walrus—well, you wouldn't do it, and I wouldn't ask. But there are other ways. Have I ever given you a bum steer?"

"Nope. We're still livin'," admitted Lefty, though he obviously waited for further explanation with skepticism in his heart.

Tug gave it. He told the pair of his newly awakened suspicions. If these were correct, it would be pie for the two killers. All they would have to do would be to keep sober, and throw half an eye upon this oddly assorted pair of men who strangely seemed to have become tillicums. When one of them bought an outfit—when one of them, or both, started out under cover of darkness to make a "stampede cache"—that would be the opportunity. Tug could visualize that scene, and gloated upon it. He was thoroughly explicit about every detail of his plan, for he know his henchmen.

"Of course this mebbe is all bunk," he said at last. "If it is—"

"We'll crack down a hundred now!" interrupted Mose decisively, giving his opinion by inference.

"You will not; you'd just get drunk and lose out com—"

Slam!

The door to the room burst open, banging back against the wall with an impetus that was none other than the now bulging eyed Sammie. "*Found* it!" he whispered raucously, breathing hard as if under a strain of well nigh unbearable excitement. "It was down under table—*they'd* been there—"

"Sit down. Close the door and lock it this time, damn you!" commanded Tug bitingly. He glared at the brutish, vacant faced Hazlett, who had turned the key before, then turned back to Sammie. "An' now spill it slow. What you got?"

Some of the wind had been taken out of his sails, but the rat-faced Sammie really had made a confirming discovery. From beneath the table at which Crusty Ballou and his new found pardner had been in conference, Sammie had chanced upon a big nugget—one shaped something like a pecan—which had a fragment of the pudding stone adhering to it. In the excitement attending the actual formation of his pardnership alliance with Crusty Ballou, Bill Nelson had seen it drop, but had thought to come back for it. Then it had slipped his mind.

Tug and the two ex-bouncers crowded down to look at the specimen. Sammie expanded his narrow pigeon breast and fairly strutted. "It's some more of thet-thar red gold!" he declared, the breath whistling through his pinched nostrils. "The dirt's still hangin' to it!"

Tug stared. He nodded slowly, reached out and thrust the nugget in the pocket of his dressing gown. "I guess that's a clincher," he growled. "You two get on the job right off! One of you stay awake all the time, so they don't slip through and get away before you know it! We—"

Sammie had fairly writhed when the nugget disappeared. "Hey!" he shrilled. "Thet's *mine!* I found it! I—"

"Shut up!" growled Tug menacingly. "Sit down there you damn' little shrimp, an' wait till I'm through!"

Sammie obeyed, collapsing like a bubble in leavened dough.

TUG had seen a lustful fire of greed in the eyes of his two henchmen. They were starkly primitive in their reactions. Gold! A new stampede! Their first and only thought—probably the only one which ever would occur to them no matter what happened—was the feverish urge to outfit themselves and be among the first to get in on the rich takings. What was a promise of six hundred dollars beside the probability of a rich claim apiece? Tug's scheming brain saw that clearly, and at once. That was why he covered up the nugget by putting it in his pocket. He did not want it especially, and did not intend to cheat Sammie; the little sneak was too valuable. But Tug would have given much if he could have presented the whole matter himself, with foreknowledge of the pudding stone nugget.

So the whole scheme was altered. "I'll go with you," decided Tug. "With a bandage I can make it. Oh, I'm not aimin' to take more'n a plain, even share—a claim, mebbe

—and I aim to pay you just like I said," he added hastily, as Mose started to turn away with a sneer. "Where the hell would either of you get together a trail outfit, if *I* didn't pay for it?" He fixed them with fishy, cold eyes.

The question was unanswerable; neither Mose nor Lefty had thought of that phase. Their credit was nil and they possessed very little dust. Of course they always could scrag some rich prospector, say, like old Seneca Marble. But Seneca was famous for not having as much as an ounce of dust on his person or in his cabin, a minute longer than necessary. He had not been sluicing lately. No, he would not do. The two were silent, their imaginations fallow. They did not even question how Tug could buy outfits and still pay them at the end of this new gold trail.

Tug had counted on that denseness. Tersely he outlined a new plan, one even more sinister than the vengeful project he had wished to launch. Providing, of course, that Crusty Ballou and Bill Nelson made some move toward securing a trail outfit, this would happen, and then this, and at last, *this!*

Mose and Lefty trooped out into the night, their ears fairly tingling, their small brains tipping. They indulged in one drink, then went down together to the general store and ordered a bill of supplies which made the seasoned proprietor grin sardonically and ask for the sight of dust—the while keeping his hand below the counter where a cocked and sawed off double barreled shotgun waited to explode its twin blasts of death.

But to that storekeeper's almost shocked surprise, Mose Ahrens laid down a creased and time worn Bank of England note for fifty pounds, and demanded change immediately.

Since that was the second trail outfit he had sold in one evening, the storekeeper naturally thought of a stampede. But he confined his surmises to the inside of his skull, for a very good reason. Just before leaving Lefty Hazlett casually presented a gun, aimed at the storekeeper's middle. "This is all kinda atween you'n us," said Lefty with blood chilling nonchalance. "I don't wanta kill yuh right now. Do I haveta? Or will yuh keep yore trap clean closed till yuh *know* we're outa town?"

The storekeepr promised fervently and, for a wonder, kept his promise.

CHAPTER V

THE FROZEN TRAIL

UNAWARE that his every movement was watched, Crusty carried through preparations for departure, using the craft gained from experience in many previous stampedes. A pair of halfbreed Tagish Indians purchased the outfit for him immediately and sledded it out to their *barabara* (dugout hogan walled with turf) on Potlick Creek. They likewise sold their four half starved mongrel dogs and sled to Crusty, who added to this slender team a big black curly haired lead dog, part Newfoundland and therefore stolidly good-natured and willing. With malamutes or huskies this animal would not have been of any use in the lead position; but dogs were scarce and Crusty believed he would have a steadying influence on the skinny curs.

Not two miles distant, Mose, Lefty and Tug assembled a second outfit; and there never was a moment when one of the three was not on watch. Sammie also kept near to Crusty Ballou or the chechako during the day; but none of the plotters imagined that the two goldseekers would depart Kowak during the hours of light. But these hours were growing steadily less.

At midnight of the third day following the formation of their partnership, Crusty and Bill Nelson ostensibly retired. A half hour later they left their lodging and strolled out of Kowak separately. They encountered no one. A fine snow was falling, which made it ideal for them; once they were on the northeastward trail all sign of their passing would be obliterated within a few hours. Kowak would surmise the truth, when they turned up missing; yet there would be nothing any of the sourdoughs could do until the pardners returned, ready to file applications for their discovery grants.

They met at the halfbreeds' *barabara*, where packs were lashed to the sled without delay and the dogs harnessed. The big black dog took this operation calmly enough, but the Indian dogs snarled and snapped at each other incessantly, showing a sudden disposition to fight among themselves and tangle the harness.

Crusty, with two heaves on the pole, broke out the sled runners. His long whip cracked twice and the mongrels heeded.

With this whip he could skin the hide from them if he so desired. "*Tcha! Tcha!* Mush, yuh rummies!" he commanded. "Yuh'll never git there, but yuh might as well try. *Tcha!*"

Bill Nelson laughed aloud as he shuffled out to accompany the black dog, to break trail if they encountered any deep snow. "Not get there?" he shouted, reaching down to pat the head of the lead dog. "Hell, we'll show him, won't we, Jethro?" The animal had been nameless, or his name had been forgotten; Bill had christened him without delay, Jethro Jason Theophilus Jorkins Junior.

But for the moment even the pessimistic objections of Crusty Ballou were silenced. There was heady magic in the start of this quest for fortune, a potent wine of adventure which thrilled every nerve, coursed in every artery. Back there Crusty caught himself grinning with elation—and growled to himself. Leave the anticipatory celebration to the chechako! Too well Crusty knew the disappointments of the trail and the hardships thereof.

Even he did not guess, however, that only a mile or so behind, another outfit, with two men on shoes and one man who rode the sled, swung into line on the trail. Tug McArdle mentally cursed the snow. They would have to take longer chances, now, than otherwise would have been necessary; for the sifting particles would blot out the trail if it was not followed closely. As for a sinister reason the sled carried only supplementary outfits—not a full provision for three men over the months of winter—he chose to ride. They had eight dogs instead of five, a trained team which once a month brought the mail down the seventy miles from Dawson City in winter.

Tug was not trail hardened like his two companions; and in addition, his wounded hand throbbed with a threat of fever. He made a snow pack for it and put it as far out of mind as he could. This trip would make him independent of the gaming tables, if it turned out as he had reason to hope. Once they had carried through their plans in respect to Crusty Ballou and the fool chechako, Tug had certain ideas which embraced the disposition of his two companions. He had no illusions concerning his status with them, for they had been easy to read. For a while they would tolerate him, because he had a cunning brain and could plan and therefore was valuable. During that time he intended to enjoy every prerogative accruing. And then, when matters were settled, he would dispense with them through the medium of a derringer, before they got around to making similar a disposal of himself.

CRUSTY drove the team at fair speed through the first hours of morning. Then the snow stopped, and against the clearing blue-black of the sky colored streamers of the aurora came like lashing pennons. A brilliant bulb of light, like a huge, misshapen sun, arose from the northeastern nadir, and hung. It lengthened, shortened again, and from it came the blues, reds and yellows of the true northern lights, causing queer furtive shadows on the snow as the dog team snailed along.

At the icy shore of a frozen stream Crusty called a halt. "No use to go on till it's light," he said. "From what yuh said we make for Old Baldy Pass through the spurs of the Rockies, an' on toward the Gauches Lakes. Wa-al, we'll camp now. I don't reckernize this-hyar creek. This country ahead is broke up pretty bad, an' I want to see what I'm doin'. 'Tain't light for about five hour."

Bill Nelson was glad to accede. He was thoroughly happy; and while he helped unharness the dogs, feed them, and build a skimpy fire of alder twigs, he sang and tried, between times, to establish the reciprocation of deeper friendship with his grumpy companion.

But his efforts aroused very little response. It may have been a premonition of the disasters which lay before them; but Crusty Ballou would not rise to the most alluring bait. He puffed at his pipe as he fried pemmican and tended the coffee pot, but the best Bill Nelson could get in answer to his own cheery enthusiasm, was a growled disclaimer of the slightest hope that the expedition ever could come to any good end. In truth Crusty Ballou, just then, was afflicted with a sudden reaction from all his well concealed enthusiasm of the previous days. He grumpily believed himself an idiot to go gallivanting off like this with a newcomer to the North, searching for some sort of gold deposit which heretofore had not figured in any of the renowned strikes in the Yukon. Pudding stone! Who ever heard of such a thing? Yah-h!

But Bill Nelson refused to be squelched. He had smiles running up and down both sides of his throat, it seemed, tickling his tonsils, trying to grow into man's sized laughs. So while he ate that first meal of the many he would take on the trail with this new companion he talked of the outside, of many new wonders and places unknown to Crusty save through hearsay.

Once Crusty interrupted the discourse, hastily lifting the ever loaded Winchester and quickly dodging to a place in the shadows outside the tiny circle of firelight. A twig or branch somewhere along their back trail had broken, or "exploded" in the descending temperature.

That was not the message Crusty received. Scowling, he peered intensely about him, but saw nothing. He more than half believed at the moment that some stealthy enemy crept upon them through the dark; so strong was the warning of this sixth sense that, without explaining to his companion what was on his mind, he stepped back into the alder scrub for a short reconnaissance.

Out beyond the fire all was silent, however. When his eyes became accustomed to the pallid, vague light of stars and the aurora, reflected on the snow, he could see humps of frozen muskeg under the five-inch layer of snow, the small clumps of scrub, and the shadowy line of their own back trail, already blurring over with the steady wind, which blew dusting wraiths of the dried snow in freakish whorls along the surface of the ground.

Just nerves, he decided. Who on earth would want to pursue him and the crazy young chechako? Who, indeed? Why, even if he and Bill had *invited* others to accompany them, they would have met only scoffing! Reasoning thus, endeavoring to rid himself of the uneasy feeling—which seemed to grow stronger rather than abate, oddly enough—he cut their own back trail, and circled. Nothing here. Strange he should feel that hunch in the marrow of his bones, and so strongly! Crusty was not superstitious at all; yet he believed that he could sense menace in the form of an animal or man, when out and away from the debilitating influences of tawdry civilization.

With a dissatisfied grunt and a shrug of his wide shoulders he gave up the search for this time, however. Even the dogs were lying contentedly about the fire, full fed for the first time in months, doubtless. So there could be no wolf-pack prowling around, waiting a chance to raid the stores. Just nerves. He probably was getting old. He'd have to pay more attention to things ahead and less to fool notions that just got generated in his own addled brain or people would be having some justice in their claim that he had "missed too many boats" home from the Northland. A jury of six would be sitting on his case, and deciding that he, Crusty Ballou, would have to be sent outside with irons on his wrists and ankles.

Just too late from the corner of his eye he glimpsed something black rise from the scrub at his left. Crusty leaped, whirling his rifle—the swift six-shooter unfortunately being buttoned down now underneath his mackinaw. But at the same instant the octagon barrel of a Schneider .42-80 slammed diagonally across his right ear, smashing the upper half of that appendage to a cauliflower pulp, sending Crusty Ballou staggering and slumping to the snow face downward, completely unconscious.

"Good!" huskily whispered a voice, that of Tug McArdle. He arose, careful of his bandaged hand. "You take care of him; tie his hands loosely. C'mon, Mose, we'll get the chechako."

Bill Nelson had heard a queer noise out there. He put little stock in Crusty's fears—for the love of heaven, hadn't he, Bill, tried every sourdough in Kowak individually, asking each to be his pardner? Why should anyone stalk them now, having refused in no uncertain terms to be in on the ground floor of the enterprise, so to speak?

But this had sounded like a gasping, muffled cry and then like someone whispering! "Hey, Crusty!" called Bill guardedly. He got no answer. "Hey, where are you—are you all right?" The question was somewhat louder. No answer still. "For the love of Mike; he couldn't have got very far. D'you s'pose he fell down in an Injun bear deadfall, or something?" questioned Bill aloud. He turned to pick up his own rifle.

"Hold it!" bade a cold, sneering voice from the periphery of firelight. "All right, drop the gun. We've got yuh covered!"

"Oh, hell!" said Bill Nelson with heartfelt emphasis. He did not guess what this portended, but it was a holdup of some sort. These two men who now advanced he recognized without difficulty. Tug McArdle, sworn enemy of Crusty and himself, certainly could mean nothing but revenge at best. And Mose Ahrens, a greasy-faced bully and general strong-arm man who was popularly supposed not to be able to go down the Yukon any further than Dawson, on account of indictments for murder awaiting him on the American side. These sordid human specimens could be after nothing good, conceivably. Also, they must have done for Crusty Ballou in some way, else they never would have dared approach the camp in this forthright fashion.

Bill wished that he had paid more serious attention to the doubts and fears of his sourdough pardner! Crusty must have guessed more of this, though, than he had mentioned. What had brought the crippled Tug McArdle from his bed? Had the news of the pudding stone somehow been relayed by telepathy, or by a spy in a room above that supposedly airtight office?

Bill was given little time for further speculation. Disarmed, forced at the point of a derringer pistol to submit to a search, he saw his precious sketch map taken and scanned briefly, then thrust away in Tug's wolverene-lined reefer pocket. His money too. Wolverene fur is peculiar in one way; besides being warm and soft, it does not gather frost The time probably will come when chinchilla, fox, beaver, marten, muskrat, Alaskan seal, ermine and the rest will have to yield precedence, at least in the far northern markets, to coats taken from this mischievous killer.

"May I ask, Tug McArdle, what you think this is?" queried Bill, his hands still aloft.

"Call me Mac, don't stand on no ceremony," bade the gambler with heavy irony. "I s'pose mebbe it looks funny to you, but not to us—eh, Mose?" He grinned at his bouncer companion.

An indistinguishable sound was his answer. Mose Ahrens could not rise to any sort of byplay, and did not try to do so.

"Well, come along—let him take his arms down," bade Tug. "I'll keep him covered, and there won't be any need to truss him up, except at night. It's getting along toward day now." He glanced up at the heavens, still illumined by stars and the shifting aurora alone, the moon hours before having sunk dispiritedly behind the mountains to the west.

SO IT was that Bill Nelson was forced to go out there on the frozen muskeg and carry in the limp body of the sourdough who had been his pardner. Then Bill had to cook a meal for these three. Later he had to fix an ice pack for the wounded hand of Tug McArdle, and bind it in place.

Crusty Ballou, still unconscious, was not given a thought. A pair of blankets were dumped on him, but then he was left to freeze, to die if that was to be his fate. Mose and Lefty patently cared not at all what happened to him. Later it was Tug himself who wrapped up the still form in a duckskin sleeping bag.

"I'll have use for him—like I'll have use for you," explained Tug, grinning and shaking his heavy jowls at the chechako whom he believed sufficiently terrified now to be tractable.

But Tug and the others had underestimated Bill Nelson after the same fashion that Crusty Ballou had done at first. Bill knew, shrewdly enough, that his innocent appearance could be an asset at times, as well as a usual handicap. Now he put on his most bewildered and unsophisticated appearance. Without the guiding hand of Crusty he seemed to be lost completely. He obeyed fairly on the jump, completing the manifold tasks the three took pleasure in making him perform, almost glad, it appeared, that he had changed masters. He was like a puppy, exuberant, full of spirits, ready to jump up and lick the hand of anyone who granted it a moment's attention.

None of the three captors looked deep into those bland eyes of blue or he might have surprised in their depths, expanding, contracting, expanding again, an iris of white flame which seemed independent of the physical limitations of the human eye.

Bill Nelson had learned much concerning the least lovely side of human character. He had been made to bring in Crusty; not because they really cared whether Crusty lived or died, but because he was an able-bodied man with a very strong back. Bill found that he would be forced to lead the party to the strike; then he and Crusty, if the latter lived, would be forced to labor at breaking out pudding stone, and smashing the rough product down to nuggets. Slaves to Tug McArdle. Though Tug did not say so, it was patent that after the ground was proved, he and his two confreres in crime would do away with the slaves, take in their pokes, and then file locations with the comissioner's agent at Dawson.

Then would come the expected stampede; but Crusty and Bill Nelson would not lead it. Instead—

Bill straightened. "You can't get away with it, Tug," he said coolly. "We've got you absolutely stopped another way; you'll pay for every bit of this outrage! The Mounties—" He stopped, apparently realizing that he had said too much.

But even when he was stubborn they got the confession out of him with red-hot knife blades placed between his fingers. He had exaggerated, lied. There were no Mounties who knew of this proposed trip. There was no possible comeback. Tug and his bullies had everything their own way. The seemingly disorganized and agonized chechako promised freely, he would lead them to the source of his gold if they just would bring Crusty Ballou back to consciousness. He alone knew the first forty miles or so. After that Bill Nelson could lead, with some help from Crusty. But until they reached a certain point in the trail Crusty, or some other sourdough who knew this region well, would have to lead.

It was a shrewd stroke. None of these three had come this far northeast. Crusty was alive. So Tug ordered him brought around and cared for. A red-hot knife blade, or some devilish persuader of a like sort, probably would open his lips almost as readily as it had persuaded Bill Nelson.

CHAPTER VI

CAPTIVES

DURING the night snow began to fall again, this time in big soft flakes. The wind ceased, and it was warmer. When Mose Ahrens tumbled out, cursing, to build a fire and wake his companions to the hardships of another day on the trail, he found two inches of new snow over everything, and all indications set for one of the quiet but seemingly interminable snowfalls which in early winter sometimes blanket this hinterland Yukon country to a depth of three feet or more.

Mose knew well enough what was necessary; for intermittently over a space of six years he had mushed on the gold trail—to no great result, because of innate shiftlessness, largely. But instead of shoveling a space for the fire, gathering enough more wood to insure breakfast, and then utilizing some of the tarp covered tinder carried by Crusty Ballou against just this sort of awakening, Mose kicked viciously at the snowy mound which sheltered Crusty himself.

"Git up an' start a fire!" snarled Mose, in an evil temper. The liquor he had drunk before starting and on the first stages of the trip had died completely in him, and he had no more. Crusty's one bottle had been taken over by Tug McArdle for safekeeping; it might be necessary as medicine in case the injured hand gave more trouble.

Crusty squirmed out of his sleeping bag with difficulty. His hands had been tied too tightly. They were not frozen; but the circulation had almost stopped hours ago. They were swollen and purple.

"Tryin' to be *funny?*" he raged, staggering as his wounded head swam with throbbing nausea. "How d'yuh think I kin do any work? My hands are gangrenin' now. Christ, kill me quick, won'tcha, an' call it a day!" He was sincere enough; he believed that the chechako, Bill Nelson, had been murdered and that he was doomed as well. Crusty shook his rawhide bound hands; then with a sob of impotent fury, he drove headlong at the unprotected and rather rounded paunch of Mose Ahrens.

Had it been Tug McArdle, Crusty might have had a chance. He certainly hit fair center. But Mose was a tougher proposition, far different from Tug. The latter would have squealed and collapsed, gasping for breath. Mose merely grunted heavily and stepped aside, and let his assailant fall face downward. He kicked Crusty Ballou; and it was mere good fortune that the crook of Crusty's elbow took up a part of the force before the heavy soled moccasin reached his ribs.

"Git up, damn yuh!" seethed Mose, almost ready to commit murder then and there, despite the fact that unless they were willing to go back to Kowak—and rather unsurely, as none of the party ever had ventured thus far in this particular direction—they had to depend upon the guidance of Crusty.

Though the fact did not become apparent to all just at that sleepy moment of waking, the snow had closed cases on one idea. Crusty Ballou would not be killed no matter what he did! These gold country pirates could not go back now, else they face some decidedly embarrassing questions, and leave a chance for fortune which had taken a grip on them all. Likewise, they could not venture into the virtually unexplored country which lay ahead, without both of their guides!

Two inches of snow, if uncomfortable, at least had insured life for Crusty Ballou and Bill Nelson. Crusty's bonds were removed forthwith. While able to perform the tasks of the trail, Tug's two associates in this barefaced kidnapping were unable to make a course and follow it where others had not trod. Tug himself was helpless; this was his first venture on the snow trail.

So it was ordained immediately that Crusty Ballou and Bill Nelson, though herded ahead at the points of guns, would live at least two months, the time it probably would take to get to the gold field beyond Gauches Lakes and thence back into recognizable territory.

Crusty slowly understood, despite a head that swam and throbbed. When Bill was kicked out of his sleeping bag, and made to go after more of the sparse wood, Crusty became almost cheerful for him. Looking ahead, he saw thirty-forty-fifty days during which he might match his intelligence against that of his captors. It may be said right off, that Crusty conceded a very few men superior strength, still fewer speed, among those he had happened to meet; and none at all better planning brains and executive ability on the trail.

He admitted freely to himself that Bill Nelson had put one over once; but that made Bill Nelson his pardner, a position no chechako ever could have attained under any other circumstances.

The one thing Crusty did not say to himself was—he had come to love that damn' chechako, and likewise hate him!

Figure it out for yourself. Crusty Ballou could not do it. But the truth was just that; and the love part of it he certainly never would show!

The day that the packless chechako, Bill Nelson, had stumbled into Kowak with his red nuggets and his carefully drawn sketch map, he had been as completely lost, probably, as any cartographer since Americus Vespucci. Lack of a single sun, sparse vegetation, and that moss covered on both sides and an absolutely cheerless blank where previously charted landmarks were sought, had sent him at an angle of twenty-five degrees from the trail direction he supposed was bringing him nearer to Dawson and the Yukon River.

From habit, however, he had made notes of certain new landmarks on the erratic course he pursued—a jagged rocky hill split in twain like the roots of a six-year molar; a junction of two creeks with a larger; a rocky cañon with a skittering, lacy fall which made four sidewise jumps in eighty feet . . . Other minor features of a strange and interesting land.

His own knowledge, added to what he had learned from hearsay through the Indians he knew, had given Crusty Ballou a fairly good notion of the region they sought. Bill was insistent that no more than two or three miles from that fall on that watercourse, was the smaller creek which ran below his discovery. Between the two, in a rock guarded fissure, lay his marked cache of food.

So now Crusty, seeing and wondering at the suddenly abject attitude of his pardner, who did not seem to be wounded in any way, knew that time would be on his side and Bill's. Therefore he set a course as straight as he knew for the Gauches Lakes region, hitherto practically unexplored by white men.

ON THE trail for one day, two, three Crusty was kept out in front, and guarded each night by a man with a rifle. He obtained no chance to speak with Bill; but at sight of the young fellow's actions a huge disappointment and disgust began to ferment in the region of his diaphragm. Bill was terrorized, apparently! He babbled. He pleaded for more than his share of food, and was kicked or knocked down by unsympathetic captors. Crusty already had revealed that Bill—and Bill alone—could lead the way over the last lap of their journey; and that doubtless saved the chechako from quick extinction. Crusty said he could go two-thirds of the way, then after the find, he could lead the last two-thirds of the way home to Kowak—if they would spare him and Bill. He made a point of that, and seemed almost as trusting as the chechako himself, when Tug vociferously assured him that such was the plan of these gold pirates.

Of course it was not, as Crusty only too well knew. Let Bill or himself get to a place where Stick Indian runners could be sent for the Mounted Police, and the chances for continued freedom of Mose, Tug and Lefty would be worth something less than five mills on the dollar.

Mose took delight, seemingly, in bullying Bill. The latter took kicks and cuffings galore, whimpering like a stray cur.

Once as they were making camp Crusty ran back, unarmed, fists clenched, furious at the indirect insult to himself. His pardner was broken in spirit! Well, Crusty was not broken!

"Damn yuh, fight *me*, like a man!" he yelled at Mose.

A derringer poked its blunt nose into his middle. Lefthanded Tug McArdle intervened, halting that rush in its inception, before the ex-bouncer could either accept or decline. "Get t'hell up front!" snarled Tug, fevered now from a wounded hand that snow packs could not heal. "Some time I aim to kill yuh—wanta make it *now?*"

The pristine savagery of that hoarse note in the gambler's voice warned Crusty just in time. Getting himself murdered out of hand would benefit neither himself nor Bill. True, the three captors might starve to death—and certainly they would not find the alleged strike—before wandering back to Kowak or to some other outpost of civilization. But there would be better chances for revenge, chances that involved freedom as well; and Crusty had no more than the normal man's desire to die.

He caught hold of himself, and with a glare of ferocity for Mose, strode over beyond the fire and plumped himself down in the snow. Somehow he was just too sick down inside to want food or anything, though he had the job ahead of preparing a meal for himself and four hungry men.

Bill came trotting up with some scant wood for the fire. He dodged like a frightened antelope at any sudden movement of one of the others. Mose, a sneering, bestial grin on his thick lips, waited till Bill passed near, then suddenly drew a revolver from beneath the left flap of his heavily lined mackinaw.

Bammp!

The shot sounded oddly short and flat in the crisp, still air. The bullet missed Bill Nelson's head by at least a yard, and arched out to lose itself inconspicuously in the snow covered muskeg.

The chechako seemed grievously startled, however. Like a jumping-jack all the strings of which have been yanked at once, he dropped the bundle of wood he was carrying, screamed in terror and leaped high into the air. Coming down he contrived to tangle his limbs so he fell and rolled—straight toward and upon the disgusted Ballou.

Mose let forth a hoarse bellow of derision; and Tug half raised from the blanket upon which he had reclined, with a sharp word of intolerant reproof for his henchman. Tug himself was on edge and irritable.

But over there where Crusty sat something unsuspected was happening. The awkward chechako contrived to thrust a wadded sheet of notebook paper into the hand of Crusty. "Don't be an idiot; *I'm* all right!" he managed to whisper into the sourdough's ear in the apparent struggle to get himself untangled and again on his feet.

Crusty heard, and his jaw dropped with surprise. But after a second of astonishment he had presence of mind enough to snap out a sentence of bitter invective arraigning Bill's clumsiness and his cowardice; and then to turn away as if too deeply disillusioned for further words.

A moment later he unwadded the single sheet of paper and read the penciled lines feverishly.

When we make our play, I'll get Lefty and maybe Mose too. They don't watch me on the trail now. Don't really worry about me, pardner!

While Bill Nelson was kicked and driven into more wood gathering, Crusty Ballou seemed to take a new lease on life. He got up, stretched his long, sinewy arms to the clouded blackness of the skies in a huge yawn, flipped something into the fire, then threw back his head and laughed in what seemed raucous derision, or at least these others, knowing Crusty by reputation, thus interpreted it.

"I got me one hell of a fine pardner, boys," he observed caustically. "I reckon I'm cured—of some things! Wouldn't yuh be, Mose Ahrens, yuh damn' big fat hummock of skunk garbage? Heh! Heh! What'll yuh have for supper, Mose? I'm treatin' yuh tonight. How'd yuh like some dried veg'able soup in a tin cup, an' caribou pemmican slumgum with some real canned potaters an' peppers in it? An'—"

Mose licked his lips and grinned. Crusty could cook, and he knew it. "Pan biscuit too, while yo're doin' it," Mose specified.

"Biscuit she is!" agreed Crusty with a hearty amiability which should have made all of them suspicious. But hungry men are notoriously undiscriminating and just at that moment Tug McArdle, who normally might have questioned such a complete about-face on the part of the man he hated, was burning in every cell of his body with the beginnings of a sinister fever induced by his exertions. Tug always had despised the North and all the loutish humans that crawled its fastnesses and grubbed its creeks or frozen tundra. But in the final reckoning, the day all flesh must face that lives and has its being here on the edge of the Arctic Circle, the clean sweet cold of Yukon winter would have none of the ill living, beefy, wounded Tug McArdle.

"Mebbe yuh'd like to come in 'ith us?" ventured Lefty, throwing a tentative glance over his shoulder. Lefty was a bruiser, as far as his huge bulk was concerned, but he once had spent one year as a convict at McNeil's Island. He had learned a cringing respect for the law. He still hoped that this coup might be engineered without demanding outright murder.

"Sa-ay!" returned Crusty, a wolfish, one-sided smile on his mouth. "I aim to be one with yuh—like the lynx-cat says to the baby foxes it finds in the cave!"

But the last of that was muttered to himself alone. If his pardner Bill Nelson was set on fooling these two legged wolverenes, he, Crusty, could deal a few off the bottom, himself! Darn' right he could!

CHAPTER VII

JUDGMENT OF THE NORTH

THE next morning Bill Nelson was kicked around as usual while the party was getting started. But now Crusty was watching, without seeming to do so. After a particularly brutal assault by Mose Ahrens, Crusty obtained a glimpse of Bill's face. And the young chechako saw. He smiled—and, since no one but Crusty could intercept the facial gesture—he winked portentously.

"Well I'll be damned!" swore the immensely pleased sourdough to himself. The kind of man who could take these indignities, and wait, wait till his hour of vengeance struck, was a new and rare kind of bird to the direct, action loving Crusty. The old-timer always had predicated his action on that ancient, homely thesis: "Do unto others as they will do unto you—only, do it first!" And outside of some few promptings of a nature grown naturally suspicious, and with reason, Crusty Ballou rarely had made that sophisticated dogma vary greatly from the Golden Rule.

His saturnine countenance gave not a sign that anything out of the ordinary had occurred to Crusty Ballou. Inside his breast, however, a little devil—one that always, in the past, had danced and jeered—was grinning happily, singing to itself in a small, husky voice of happiness.

On the trail the two teams made good progress, for the snow had packed a little and was not yet deep enough, save in the drifts, to cause the dogs any especial trouble. Tug rode the sled drawn by the eight dog mail team; Lefty was at the pole; and Crusty shuffled his webs ahead. His job was mainly to direct the course; but in the low spots of the way or where the snow had drifted, he broke trail.

The five dog team of mongrels, with the black dog as leader, followed with Mose and Bill. Mose rode sometimes, but usually he shuffled along as a rearguard, making Bill handle the dogs. This the chechako did, as it seemed, chiefly by main strength and awkwardness, handling the long moosehide whip so carelessly or badly that several times Mose snapped warnings at him.

A strange expression lay beneath the assumed humility of Bill Nelson on these occasions. On the back throw of the long lash, twice he had come near Mose's head. He had the distance measured. A man on webs, following a trotting or walking dog team, unconsciously keeps the same exact distance from it, hour after hour. Only on uneven ground is he apt to lag or gain as much as a yard. Bill knew this. He knew as well that in the hands of one truly skilled, the dogwhip is a terrible weapon: one used upon the dogs themselves, by experienced mushers, only in extremity, or to separate quarrelsome animals. It can snap off the close set pointed ear of a husky as clean to his skull and as instantaneously as the blade of a thrown knife. It can stun a man, kill him outright, perhaps, if it strikes at the temple or some other spot where life throbs near the surface.

Bill had seen marvellous exhibitions of skill with the whip. For his own amusement, during the long days alone before he had started for Kowak, he had attempted and practised some of the stunts. While he had attained no more than a neophyte's proficiency with the lash, he waited with well concealed impatience for the time when a signal for a break for freedom would come from Crusty. Meanwhile he pretended to tangle the whip about his own neck and legs, sometimes stumbling and falling, then scrambling up hastily to escape the fist or rifle butt swung by Mose.

The latter never really dreamt of danger other than accidental. Had one of his companions suggested that for several days of that northeastward trail his very life had been at the mercy of the sissy-boy he delighted in bullying, Mose would have guffawed. "Bill Nelson? Why, that fella was so scared he'd turn an' run if a chunk o' sp'ilt pemmican started to crawl to'ards 'im!"

Two more trail days passed uneventfully. Without more than confirming his choice of the markers by asking Bill Nelson about them in presence of the others, Crusty showed them all that he was dealing fairly with his unwelcome assignment. Bill acknowledged miserably that he recognized both landmarks. Crusty joined in baiting the chechako, as well. It seemed that he was doing all that lay in his power to placate Tug McArdle and the two ex-bouncers, with an eye to sharing the spoil when once it was found. Of course he was a fool to dream of that, as even Mose Ahrens knew.

They had made almost too swift progress. Snow flurries had come intermittently, but not enough new snow had fallen to impede the dogs. But now, when they were within two days at most of the first of Gauches Lakes, retribution arrived. The temperature within a few hours suddenly dropped to zero, to five, ten, fifteen below, and a whistling wind swept horizontally from the northwest.

Crusty held up his mittened hand, stopping the teams. He scanned the leaden sky for several minutes, then turned about. "Blizzard!" he shouted downwind. "Must get covered—wood! No time to waste!"

Tug McArdle stirred in his swathings of robes. "G'wan! G'wan!" he fretted in a strange, ghastly voice, the froth bubbling from between his fevered lips. One hand came up laboriously from beneath the robes; it was his left. It wabbled as it bore a derringer into something of a line. Tug nevermore would use his right. It lay in an ineffectual ice pack, numb, turning black-green to the elbow.

Mose came running up from the rear team. "Put it away!" he commanded the sick man. "Damn yuh, we gotta have this fella! Hey—"

Tug paid absolutely no attention. He possibly did not even hear—or probably heard and did not care. The fever of death was thrumming in his temples. His eyes were wide and glassy. The chances are that this was a spurt of the last volition in that fat-insulated body. Crusty Ballou, his hated enemy, stood within six paces—unarmed! Tug tried to control the shaking of his less sure left arm. Even at that short range a derringer was not so certain. He rested his left elbow on his pudgy abdomen. Through the stomach would be best. There!

A single report shattered the tragic stillness, but it was not from the .41 derringer held by Tug. Running up on his shoes, Mose Ahrens had sized up the situation quickly enough—in fact had guessed it before he came from the rear team. Tug was no use, anyway. Crusty Ballou was. Ergo, there could be no choice. Mose had cocked his single-action six-shooter at the first sign of trouble. Now, without warning or other bother, he cracked one .45 slug through the head of his erstwhile employer, Tug McArdle, the widening, mushrooming lead tearing out the whole of Tug's left ear and spattering the gray of his brains down in two streams to his chin.

Tug continued to sit propped upright, although dead. The hand holding the derringer slumped outside the sled. Then the dead man's fingers slowly tightened. A blasting double report startled the others, even the hardboiled Mose.

But a couple or three minutes restored equilibrium. "Thassall for 'im!" said Mose. "Ain't it?" he added as a demand, looking about at the others, threatening against the time he might return to the region of towns and men.

"Yo're damn' right!" acceded Lefty. "Yuh hadda do it."

"Maybe you chaps forget, but there is a big snow coming," reminded Bill, coming slowly up from the rear. "What can we do to live through it?" He looked toward Crusty.

"Huh!" snorted the latter, who had been fascinated by the last incident, in which he had been powerless, caught flatfooted. "Heave that body out inta the snow. Then c'mere. Yuh-all see that cliff over there mebbe a half mile? That's us. Turn the small team loose; we can't feed 'em if we're holed up a long time—an' if we ain't they'll come back to us. They foller, anyhow. Pack the grub on yore backs. It don't take no weather prophet to guess we're in for a sizzler!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE STORM

FOR once Crusty missed his prediction, slightly. Down the whole back door route to the Klondike, up the Great River, now called the Mackenzie, from Fort Good Hope to Resolution on the southern shore of Great Slave, down the Biche—which men now call the Athabasca—a blizzard raged. The Tagish Indian hogans on the Greasy Lakes were buried under eleven feet of snow; and in the spring to come men would come upon mouldering bodies; later, wolf picked, pathetic skeletons. For these dwellers of the tundra, even, there had been no path to food or fuel.

Camped in the shelter of the low cliff Crusty and his captors witnessed an awesome phenomenon. The weak daylight of early afternoon was blotted out in a churning murk above. The wailing of the wind rose note by note; from a buffeting sound like the rushing and beating of giant wings, it gained direction and terrific force. The tone of it went higher. First it was the rushing grand organ note at full stop. Then a higher voiced scream began, mounting, mounting, until it was at the timbre of a peanut stand whistle. Perchance since the days of chaos there never had been such a wind. Way south, two thousand miles away, the Canadian Government anemometers at Edmonton whirled themselves to madness and snapped. They had been geared to register only moderate hurricanes, up to one hundred miles an hour.

But these watchers, sheltered by the low cliff, were far from being blind men huddling in a nightmare of the elements. Above them the pagan Thor and his whole herd of billygoats had gone fire crazy! Among the wind buffeted soccer footballs of black cloud played forked lightning incessantly—lightning which may have come to earth somewhere, but which lost the last tone pitch of its thunder in the screaming of what seemed the greatest wind an addled world had known!

And above that, unperturbed, showing through queerly as the fragmentary, terrible storm drove southward to wreak its will upon men and four footed animals alike, was a display of accentric streamers of the northern lights, whipping out here a million miles into space, glowing red, green, purple; then drawn back like the tentacles of a senseless ameba, to be pushed out again in vari-colored pseudopods, shut out from man's sight; shown again.

But almost no snow fell in this region! For a short time there was an almost microscopic rain-dust in the air, fine frozen particles like the emery grindings from razor steel, flung into the hurricane. But behind the cliff the four goldseekers did not know. Without a fire, since there was no wood here, they huddled down in their sleeping bags, parkas or mackinaws buttoned high, and only occasionally stirred to look out upon a firmament gone mad.

The eight dogs of the mail team lay curled about them. What the fate had been of the other five the men could only surmise; for with their black haired leader these had not come to the cliff shelter. Driven, bowled from their feet, finally frozen stark by the whooping blast from the chill upper air, these doubtless were scattered and lost, as unimportant to that devasting storm as so many white feathers fluttering from a wounded ptarmigan.

Mose and Lefty did not bother to shackle either of the prisoners. Huddling there, expecting the final trial of a heavy snowfall, the thoughts of a possible gold strike receded into dim memory. No one spoke; and after the first few moments in the shelter nothing less than a scream could have penetrated that turmoil of the elements as far as a yard. It was each human atom for himself. With snow somewhat to assuage a growing thirst, and rocky, frozen pemmican in which the raisins were like fragments of marble, each could fight his battle. Four other men might have crowded close to one another, particularly as one day and night, scarce distinguishable, passed in howling chaos; but the members of this band owed or felt no allegiance one to another. True, one of the "henskin" bags containing a curled up human, rolled over twice, until it bumped into that occupied by Crusty Ballou. But the latter, by a couple of prods, guessing that this was Bill Nelson, grunted and turned on his right side, presenting his back. Between those two huddled shapes then lay four inches of clear space, through which the balked, eddying wind raised little snow spouts. By now Crusty saw clearly the method by which he determined to do away with at least one of their remaining captors; but with the details worked out in his mind, he could not regard this devastating storm as anything save a handicap to the carrying out of his plan.

Bill Nelson was of different nature. He slept for a time, then tossed restlessly for hours, visualizing what must happen if he left his protective covering and sprang upon one of the two ex-bouncers. Probably they kept some sort of a watch, though this was problematical. No doubt, if awake and wary, either one would shoot as quick as a wink. That was not the feeling which deterred Bill, however. He had withstood as much of the hazing and cruelty as he believed sufficient. Now there had come a cessation. He could not think of arising meekly again in the role he had chosen, and allowing that pig of a Mose Ahrens to kick him, without protest! No! If Crusty would have none of him, after that revealing note—on which Bill Nelson had chanced much—Bill would go it alone. He had an irregularly oval stone in his mackinaw pocket, one that weighed approximately two pounds. Wielded like a hammer in the hand of a man it could be a terrible weapon. Bash in an enemy's head!

Bill thought for some time, nerving himself to a distasteful task. If he caught them asleep he would merely stun them, or try not to kill, at any rate! If he made them both prisoners, perhaps Crusty would not sneer at him again!

But unknown to the chechako, the most cruel forces in all nature had allied themselves with Mose and Lefty. Gusty and uneven now, but still terrible, the wind swooped and howled. Across the level barrens it swept in pulsing waves at a full one hundred miles an hour. Here, behind this fortunate windbreak—without which all four men must have perished as quickly as the five dogs they had unharnessed—it curled and whipped and backslapped in what seemed an orgy of balked fury. Not more than one-eighth of an inch of new snow had fallen; yet when, a few hours later, Bill cautiously poked his way out of the purse mouth of his "Bonanza No. 3," he found himself under more than a foot of snow! This simply had been dredged up from the tundra, carried along, then dumped incontinently in whorls and queer drifts about the foot of the cliff.

There was a little light. Though Bill could not guess, it was two o'clock in the afternoon, just a little before early sunset at this time of year. But there was no sun, would not be for thirty hours more. The clouds had shut down more sullenly. The wind had subsided a trifle. And it was really cold.

Bill looked about him. He saw nothing but a two foot, unmarked drift of snow! His companions were here somewhere—*but where?* He stepped out, flexing his stiff limbs, staring about him. For the moment he was master of all he surveyed, and the prospect struck him queerly. Right there underneath that queerly shaped mound probably was the sleeping bag of Crusty. Over there a little way were Mose and Lefty—unless they had moved during the storm, which was not likely. What should he do?

His course was decided within three minutes. The cold struck in. In truth it was not much more than thirty below zero, which temperature ordinarily is considered "about right" for the winter thawing of gravel with the porcupine boilers of the Klondike; but the wind intensified this lack of warmth at least thrice. Swaying, leaning against the dying hurricane, which swirled in crazy buffets, striving to snatch him from his feet and fling him out there on the level barrens where even ghostly bands of caribou tailed down and died, Bill suddenly realized that he was freezing to death on his feet!

He had stood like one stupid through a minute, another—

With an inarticulate sound, perhaps an oath of frustration, he turned about and crawled in feet first, seeking avidly the henskin wrapping which had seemed so warm. Then he shivered and quaked for a full hour, the teeth fairly rattling in his head, while his body strove to make up the wasted heat.

Crusty Ballou was something like a bear. With no more than a turn or two each twelve or twenty-four hours—which gave him a more complete renewal of air within his bag, and a sight of what was going on without—he slept. Once he reached out, brought in a mitten full of snow and sucked that to ease his thirst. Then he chewed down a little jerky he always carried as an emergency ration, and slept again.

Quite as though they had not been, two full days and three nights were erased from the calendar of the expedition. When Lefty finally arose, hungry as any ravening beast of the tundra, and cursed at a sun hanging like a red balloon just above the southeastern horizon, it was still and cold. Obeying the miner's habit, Lefty took a small bottle from an inner pocket and held it out in his mittened hand. Within the bottle a cubic centimeter of mercury rolled back and forth like silver syrup. It was the "miner's thermometer," the rough means of determining a deadline between weather too cold for a porky boiler, or a man, and that in which it is businesslike to thaw and pile some gravel against the time when water will run.

A minute was sufficient. The little blob of quicksilver slipped back and forth more slowly, reluctantly. Of a sudden it stopped. When Lefty shook the bottle the liquid metal rattled; it had shrunk and frozen solid! So Lefty knew it really was as cold as he suspected, surely more than thirty-nine degrees below zero, and probably sixty, at least. He had no more accurate means of appraisal.

Gradually camp life took up where it had been before the blizzard hiatus, with one difference. Mose and Lefty, faced by the necessity of keeping their hands encased against the penetrating cold, could not depend upon revolvers. Therefore one of the two always stood guard with a rifle. And since both, wearing heavy mittens, handled even the longer weapons fumblingly, Bill Nelson thought he saw an opportunity. He took his chance and passed a quick question to Crusty; but a single shake of the head was his only answer. The sourdough believed he had a method which would act more surely, and at the same time supply the vengeance which he craved.

CHAPTER IX

THE BLOWHOLE

NEXT morning, though the temperature had not moderated in the slightest, Mose Ahrens commanded a start. After a scant meal of coffee and bannock, when the ravenous dogs had been fed again, Bill and Crusty tackled the exasperating and seemingly interminable job of harnessing eight insubordinate huskies, possessed of genius in trouble making, and who knew well enough that the tender fingers of their irate masters could be used only a few seconds at a time, without warming in those big fur paws they put on outside their hands.

During the course of the nerve rasping job, although Mose stood near with a rifle, cursing in his impatience to be on the trail, Bill got several chances to speak swiftly in an undertone to his pardner.

"When will we try for it?"

"The odds are almost even; let's take a chance!"

"What's wrong, pardner? You're not afraid to back a play against these buffleheads?"

These were three quick asides; but none received an answer, until the last which the irritated and possibly over anxious Bill made well nigh a taunt. He had stood much, more than Crusty, without doubt.

Crusty straightened for a moment. "Go to hell!" he snapped aloud. "T'day we come to the last landmark, fella! After that, till we come back, I reckon yuh do some highfalutin' leadin'! Yuh better be lookin' at yore map, 'n' rememberin'!"

Did one narrowed, socket sunken eye flicker for the breath of an instant in a revealing wink? Bill, utterly disorganized by the unexpected condemnation and warning, could not be sure. He sank back on his knees, fumbling with the traces, far in the air. "My God, is this what you call a pardner?" he breathed.

"Pardner, hell!" gritted Crusty. "Buckle them traces an' shut up!"

"Yeh; damn' right!" seconded Mose, the guard at that moment, who had heard every word of Crusty's defi. He grinned. The longer these two could be kept quarreling between themselves, the safer would be Lefty and himself. Already he felt sorely the lack of Tug McArdle's guidance. Fat and half insane as he had been, still Tug would have had more savvy in handling prisoners. The impulse of Mose simply was to kill the two; and now Lefty might have joined him, for the lesser of the bouncer pair was suffering from chilblains in his feet and ankles, due to a soaking received prior to the onslaught of the cold.

When the belated start did come, Lefty claimed the right to ride atop the hugely packed sled. A quick, though low voiced dispute arose instantly. Mose had figured this privilege his, after Tug's demise; surely Mose now led the expedition, did he not? What were bad feet?

But Lefty showed resourcefulness. He seemed to turn away, disgruntled. Then he swept about, a gun in his bared hand. "Talk damn' quick or I'll shoot!" he whined at Mose. "Do I get what I want—or do I throw in with these—"

"Yuh ride now, till yore feet get better," promised Mose, really so surprised he forgot to become furious. So Lefty had some spunk, eh? Mose had begun to believe otherwise. Well, so much the better! "As soon as yuh can get off an' use webs, though, I'm aiming to rest m'se'f some," added Mose.

"Soon's I kin walk on shoes agin!" promised Lefty gratefully. "While yo're back I'll kinda keep an eye on these fellas we got with us. Like at night," he went on with a gouge of bitterness. More than half of the night watches had been his since the time Tug had been left behind. That had been part of the reward of leadership usurped by Mose.

Soon after ten o'clock sun-up, after five hours on the trail, they came to a thirty-foot snowy lane, one that wound through a barren country of naked porphyry, feldspar and calc rock, a country only sparsely dotted with stretches where the browned joints of dead squaw weed bent forlornly above the sculptured but shallow snowfall.

It was a small river or large creek, the way interior Yukon has it. Frozen and snowed over, of course. Crusty reached it and voicelessly signalled a halt. He turned back to the completely covered Lefty, who shivered on the top of a huge pile of provisions, tools and other effects. Crusty's eyes passed, came to Bill Nelson who "rode the string." Was there a pregnant signal in that darting glance? Bill thought so, strangely enough, after the way his pardner seemingly had deserted.

Mose, five paces behind on his webs, stopped in his tracks. He brought up the loaded Winchester he had been carrying couched on his hip. But he waited. The low cunning of his brain constantly was on the alert for some shrewd move or violence from the sourdough who now guided them all. Killing would not do, or Mose would have killed. But even he realized that the four of them now were alone in a circle of close to one hundred miles' radius, a circle that practically no white man had penetrated save with Indian guides. And there were no parties of Indians and white men coming over from the Great River, or over from Hunker Creek, at this time of year. They were alone in a waste of snow, their back trail wiped out. And just one man could chart the course back to Kowak from here. He was Crusty Ballou. Only one man knew the route to the pudding stone treasure; he was Bill Nelson. Ergo, both must live for some time. Even a small brain, trained chiefly in barroom violence and whisky intrigue, could visualize that much.

Crusty slid down and tested the ice near shore. Then he went to snowy midstream and jabbed down the steel point of the shandy he plucked from its straps above the right runner of the sled. He had not been allowed to carry it on the trail, because of its possibilities as a weapon.

He seemed satisfied, nodding his head. The creek covering was irregular, very thick except where the current below roiled, and there thinning to inches or less, with occasional blowholes where the pent up pressure of air spent itself in round apertures no more than six feet in diameter and usually occurring in the neighborhood of thin ice.

Within a space of minutes the team was out on the creek surface in fairly smooth travelling, the lolling tongues and upright brushes of the huskies evincing their satisfaction.

"And up thisaway som'ers are them four falls yuh talked about, 'less I went wrong a long ways," shouted Crusty, dropping back beside the sled. "Once we pass 'em, yo're guide!"

Once again Bill Nelson felt rather than

heard a message totally different from the words which his pardner spoke. What could it be?

He was not left long in doubt. When Crusty set a shuffling pace equivalent to the dogtrot of the team, Bill cracked his whip, forgetting now the awkwardness which he had exhibited purposely on the earlier stages of the journey. But it did not matter. Back of him a few paces Mose Ahrens automatically ducked his face into the twin collar folds of his parka, then plodded on, no more than a baleful look from his black eyes rewarding what he deemed to be the chechako musher's carelessness.

THEN Crusty saw that for which he had searched and waited. Ahead of him, where the mountain torrent boiled around the base of a short vertical cliff, there was black open water that thus far had defied the cold. In midstream, twenty feet from the edge of the shell ice bordering the whirlpool, was a nearly circular black expanse, a blowhole! Without a second even of hesitation Crusty led the dogs a yard inside the dangerous aperture! Obedient to his lead, following his slight trail in the snow, the first of the eight huskies passed the black hole. The second passed. The third—

Suddenly the sourdough turned sharply to his left, outward, circling the blowhole. He had calculated well. Dog after dog, the entire team, stepping each dog in the prints of the dog before, or nearly, circled the dangerous hole.

The instant the last dog was clear, Crusty suddenly slapped together the palms of his mittens. "*Mush! Tcha!*" he cried in a ringing voice. "*Now at 'em, Bill!*"

The effect of that signal was terrifying in its unexpectedness. Drowsing, half numb as he was on top of the unwieldy load of provisions, tools and the like, Lefty opened his eyes and poked his head out, for all the world like some furry sort of antediluvian turtle poking out its beak. And he looked—yelled in sudden terror—

Yanked from its course by the sudden change of the dogs, the sled went straight for the blowhole! Into the water! Lefty tried to untangle himself from the maze of blankets and furs which had given him a certain warmth. He did not succeed wholly. The sled tipped nose downward into the creek water. Its load and Lefty were precipitated forward.

At the long awaited yell of his pardner, Bill Nelson sprang to attention. The long whip, dangling from a thong at his right elbow and trailing backward in the snow, was snatched up.

Back of him Mose Ahrens, not comprehending any too quickly, was raising his rifle in mittened hands, uncertain whether or not this was an occasion for powder smoke and lead.

Just ahead of him Bill Nelson, keen for just this long overdue moment of retribution for all the bullying and injuries he had received, threw forward the long lash. Then came a swishing sidearm flip, ending in a full backward swing and a wrist jerk. The plaited, stiffened rawhide snapper, whizzing back in a snaky arc like a rattler striking unbelievably far, caught Mose Ahrens squarely in the little patch of his face he had uncovered. It bit deep into his right cheekbone, slanted upward and to the left through the corner of one eye, and laid open the skin on his low forehead in an ugly, triangular flap.

As if poleaxed, the bulky Mose gave way at the knees and slumped face forward, unconscious to the snow trail. He twitched once, then turned slowly to his left side.

For one second then the triumph seemed complete. With a yell Crusty leaped back past the struggling, frightened dogs, striking at a muffled almost helpless figure, Lefty, with his nine foot shandy. One stroke, and Lefty lay still. It had not been a blow to kill, only to stun. Crusty Ballou was exultant. He had seen in a brief glance how well Bill Nelson had interpreted the veiled orders. Mose, the most dangerous of the pair—the one Crusty really had expected to have on the sled, and to cope with—was laid out cold. Lefty was unconscious. The sled was tipped into the hole, and the load was spilled out on the shell ice. But a little care—

Bill Nelson suddenly screamed a frantic warning. At his feet a black crack had opened, widening swiftly! Under the weight of the team and sled and four men the half inch ice was breaking!

Bill leaped, and by the toes of his moss-stuffed moccasins, made safety. Behind him Crusty yelled, skipping swiftly for the heavier ice. Then making one last, despairing dive with arms outstretched as his feet went into water, water colder by far than the ice which covered it.

Horror-sticken, Bill saw him slide into water up to his shoulders, clutching hand over hand at ice that broke away in thickening wafers as he came nearer. Crusty's face was convulsed with the awful chill, and the knowledge that doubtless all this last moment striving was for naught, now the water had him. No human being could live for more than a few minutes, even if he managed to get a hold and somehow dragged his numbed limbs up into the snow which lay atop the firmer ice.

Out there a whole dog team, a sled, and two unconscious men—men who deserved a fate far less merciful, but who were men nevertheless—went down into five feet of water, beneath the ice. They would not be seen again, except as fragments of cloth and fur and bone, tossed up on some placer strand lower down the creek, come another spring.

Bill scarcely saw that. His eyes were upon Crusty. Hurling himself full length and inching outward, Bill extended one mittened hand and clutched the tensed wrist of his pardner. Then, painfully inching backward, conscious that beneath him the ice creaked and swayed, Bill drew forth his half dead pardner. Once certain of the footing, Bill leaped upright. Without troubling to waste a second, he leaned forward and dashed for the thin timbered shore, dragging the rapidly numbing Crusty like an awkward travois, behind him.

At the shore Bill dropped him head first in the snow, and sprinted madly for the first shoots of timber. A fire! Unless they could have a fire in a space of a very few moments, Crusty was done for!

Working like one gone insane, wielding his small jacknife—the only semblance of a weapon left him by the captors—Bill slashed and jerked away dead wood, squaw weed for tinder, more wood. Slivers!

"God—for an armful—fat pine logs!" he gasped jerkily.

The amount he managed to gather was pitifully small, in the space of seconds he dared utilize. But then he dashed back, scraped away the snow from a spot on the creek bank, and lighted his fire with hands that shook. Off came his mackinaw; on the fur lining of this, placed so close that the fire singed it, Crusty and he would do battle for the lives of both. Though Bill Nelson did not stop to realize it at the time, his own very existence hung in the balance.

Crusty was not unconscious, though very nearly. "No—use—damn yuh," he managed to gasp faintly. "Legs—gone—"

"The hell they are!" cried Bill, a hysterical break in his voice. He was tearing at the high moccasins of the elder man, unable to give up, even when he had to take his knife and cut through the frozen rawhide laces. "You've got to live, my pardner! You've *got* to!"

THE upshot of the matter was that Crusty did live, after a thirty-six hour fight with alder wood, snow rubs, and muttered, half sheepish prayer, as weapons Bill could use. He had not a utensil now, not a weapon save the tiny jackknife. His waterproof match safe held only six more sulphurs, stuck together in a tenuous block. Six fires—perhaps!

Oddly enough, Crusty Ballou had nothing at all to say. To Bill's husky voiced pæan of thanksgiving for his restoration, Crusty dropped his glance. When Bill clapped him on the shoulder, nerve worn and tired but not yet quite giving up, Crusty painfully raised himself to his frosted feet, and donned the garments which had been dried at the fire. Then he picked up the fur lined mackinaw and flung it at Bill. "Curl up!" he commanded gruffly. "I'll get some more wood. Gimme yore knife."

"But Crusty!" began Bill in protest, nevertheless fishing for the knife and handing it over. He was overjoyed to see that his pardner could walk.

"Curl up, damn yuh!" snarled Crusty, quite as intolerantly as if it had been Bill who had placed his life in danger, not saved it.

This time Bill obeyed with a sigh. The other man was a being beyond understanding, particularly when Bill's own brain was stupefied from constant struggle against odds, added to the terrific strain of staying awake more than forty hours, most of which time had been darkness. Knotted up in a ball which probably would be uncomfortable before many hours had passed, Bill had dropped into that deep unconsciousness which is the greatest blessing of a life spent in the outdoor North. Nowhere else, undrugged, do men sleep so completely unharassed by dreams or minor discomforts.

When Crusty came back with his first

skimpy armful of wood and warmed himself at the fresh leaping blaze, he looked long down at Bill Nelson. His seamed face showed no emotion, but the deep set eyes appeared to glow in the firelight. None knew better than Crusty Ballou how slight a chance either of them had of ever winning back to an outpost even such as Kowak. Still, that was not at all the thought in Crusty's mind. Certainly it was not the emotion whch caused the unused muscles of his cheeks to draw back in the odd semblance of a stiff grin.

A-course the chechako never'd know. Crusty couldn't tell him, an' he wasn't long on guessing, it looked like. When he really wanted to act up best, Crusty'd prob'ly snarl like a wolf, and bite off the fella's left ear. That was the way it'd gone in the past.

Muttering a heartfelt curse, which was not at all for the youngster who lay there sleeping, or even for the painful job he had in mind, Crusty sat down in the snow, his feet almost in the fire, and pulled off his moccasins and sox.

One critical glance confirmed his surmise. Both little toes were stark white, except at the nails, where a purple hue was beginning to show. First tearing up some cloth into strip bandages, Crusty whetted Bill's knife on the side of one limp moccasin, until the steel showed razor sharp.

Then Bill operated upon himself. Two decisive blows upon the horizontal knife-blade, with the heel of his horny right fist, a searing with two red hot embers, then a speedy and tight bandaging of two only slightly bleeding knuckle stubs of toes. The sourdough grimaced for the first time, after putting on his sox, when he came to draw on the moccasins. Pain could be withstood, had been many times. This soreness and ache would be some harder, mebbe.

With a backward glance and a ghostly, reluctant sort of smile, Crusty Ballou hobbled out nearly a quarter of a mile toward a small clump of alders he had espied.

CHAPTER X

ONE PARDNER

BILL did not learn of his pardner's sore feet at that time, or much misery of spirit might have been spared them both. Crusty said nothing. Facing certain death, unless they reached the food cache of the chechako's ill fated expedition, or the crude *barabara* he had constructed for the sick Indians who had been his guides, a small matter like sore and aching feet meant nothing, according to Crusty's stern code.

But in the course of savage days that followed—days in which the sourdough located the last of the given landmarks, the frozen waterfall, and then surrendered the lead to Bill—they bulked larger than Crusty himself imagined. They hurt constantly; and this attrition of the spirit added to the searing cold, famine, and a growing, almost intuitive belief that even if Bill's memory did not play him false, the cache somehow would prove valueless or insufficient.

Crusty Ballou did not fear death to any greater degree than do most men called brave. Somehow the constant, nagging pain in his feet, adding itself to the emptiness of his stomach and to the parching thirst which came from sucking ice and snow impossible to melt for lack of a container, hour by hour drove Crusty Ballou back into the unapproachable, sneering personality from which he had been emerging slowly. He snarled at Bill, who met these caustic comments and sneers with silence, a hurt wistfulness deep in the blue eyes.

Bill did not know what to do about it. He was worried, too. When the moment came for him to make his decision, the moment when he had to turn in one direction or another and set forth from the quadruple waterfall now ice shrouded, his face blanched chalk white. The country all looked so different under its blanket of snow! Though he had believed one day would prove sufficient to backtrack at least as far as the stilt legged food cache, and had so assured Crusty repeatedly, once he was asked to go ahead and demonstrate he was appalled. He looked slowly about him, did not speak. Bill had some training in geology, surveying, and mapmaking, of course. And he was not at all the sort of plunger who will play stud poker on the basis of paying ten dollars to look at possible complements to a deuce in the hole. He would not simply strike forth on a blind course, hoping by some freakish whim of a guiding providence to find his objective.

Bill took his time, chose his direction—albeit with a sick feeling at the pit of his stomach, for he could not be sure—and led the way slowly. He had not tasted food for sixty hours, and believed that he would starve to death within another day, possibly two. Or maybe, freeze. In the warm countries, with ease and a plentitude of good water, a healthy man may fast several weeks, if he be that foolish. Not in the North; and especially not on the winter trail. Cells in his body burn up and flatten into ashes, for all the world like pea coal in a great forge. He weakens. Then shortly he dies; and all the fur wraps in the world, or all the sputtering campfires, will not do for him what a few butterless oatmeal flour bannock, or a batch of biscuit mixed out of the "sourdough jar," will do. Plenty of black smoking java or "biled" tea with it, of course, and some good, fat sowbelly and beans.

Either Crusty or Bill would have given some more toes, and thrown in a shinbone or two, just for one such spread! Bill did not know their entire resources encompassed as much as one scrap of food; for Crusty had not mentioned any. Perverse and grumpy, his particular species of semi-insanity, engendered most by his aching feet, made him say not a word about the stiff moosehide pouch he invariably carried sewed into the tail lining of his mackinaw. There was some dried and pounded caribou jerky in that pouch, four pounds of it. The concentrated nutriment derived from over ten times that weight of fresh haunch. Enough to take two desperate men a long way on the snow trail.

Crusty was far from normal, himself. He did not dream of what would have struck many a man first. With food, Bill's eyes might clear, his memory grow sharper. Crusty, just through doggoned perverseness, had doubted Bill's story even when he paid out his money for an outfit, and chanced his own life on the winter trail. Now Bill had to come through or die. At least it would seem that way to Bill. Actually this little pouch of jerky would no more than postpone the inevitable. Sneering, grouching, chousing like a big wolf with a broken shoulder, Crusty earned again his unflattering nickname. But he did not even touch the moosehide pouch of jerky. If his pardner starved to death with food within reach, Crusty Ballou also would starve. Straight up and down in his mind was the thought that Bill was a good deal of an irresponsible kid. If he had to find that cache or *barabara*, or starve to death, he might make the grade. Prob'ly not even then, though.

So Crusty plugged along behind. And the conviction that his pardner was hopelessly lost, increased each hour of the trail.

"Yo're no damn' good. Yo're lost!" accused Crusty, early in the dark morning of that second day. "I'll say yo're one hell of a mapmaker; can't foller yore nose from here to there! Puddin' stone! Hah!"

"I'm lost," admitted Bill Nelson miserably. "It's my fault—and I don't care a damn about myself, Crusty—in a place like this. I'm sorry I—oh, hell! We're standing here, a couple or three miles at the most, away from that cache. I—"

Of a sudden a queer impulse caught Crusty Ballou. His purpose had seemed inflexible, but—well, the mind of a man who had come almost to love another man, after a loneliness of years, cannot be stripped out, Chinese whited, and presented in vignette. Crusty loved his pardner, even though he did not realize the fact at all, and would not, for another waste of lonesome hours.

"Close yore eyes. Turn away—an' wish for what yuh'd like *most!*" said Crusty in a queer, mounting excitement. He waited till Bill got through staring and closed his eyes, swaying a little on his feet. Then with one bared hand Crusty went down and back to the pouch. His hand fumbled oddly, the same hand which could throw down and snap the hammer of a sear-filed six-shooter with speed and appalling accuracy.

But Bill played fair. He did not know what was to come, but he kept his eyes fast shut. He was hungry down inside for something more than food, though his stomach had gone through its rigors of demanding and now was sulking and empty. Bill thought he was to die, he would have given the day or two or three possibly remaining to him, had he been able to tell his justly impatient pardner the way to the food cache, the *barabara*, and the ledge of pudding stone. But his mind was of no use now. Dumbly, when Crusty bade him do so, he opened his mouth. And into it was crammed something infinitely delicious, a half handful of pounded jerky!

"Take yore time an' chew it good. Yeah, I had mine," snapped Crusty irritably, lying. He had not tasted it. "Had a little of it I saved. Reckon I'll get some wood.

We kin have one last fire—an' after that we don't even smoke no more."

Even at that moment a vague notion was taking shape in his mind. They were both done for, even if he opened up the jerky and put them on rations. Could Bill Nelson find his cache, if he were given that extra three-four days—a week in all, perhaps? Or—

Crusty was a long time gathering those sticks. But what matter? It was not yet dark, no more than three o'clock in the afternoon. His knees wabbled under him, and when he bent low his head swam. He knew the signs. By morning he would be burned out, unfit to travel more than a short distance. Then there would be no fire even. This night he would smoke his old pipe to dull the ache in his limbs, smoke it all night long, perhaps. Then, with the morning—

A wild yell from Bill Nelson came to his ears. Crusty looked up vacantly. He heard his own name called with insistence.

"What the hell?" he mumbled turning around, and slowly shuffling back toward the spot which had been designated as their camp.

Shouting something, Bill Nelson came running toward him, tripped over his webs and fell headlong. He got up. "Crusty, I remember! That jerky put something back into my head, I guess! The cache is right over there! Not a half mile! Come quick!" he was pointing frantically with one mittened hand.

Still Crusty did not believe, though a slow thrill grew in his aching limbs. He nodded, but at the same time shook his head. "There won't be nothin' there," he said with morose certainty. "We're done, lad."

BILL was right—but so, tragically enough, was Crusty. Ten minutes later the two stood before the splintered remnants of what once had been a stout cache, considering the dwarf timber of "the Land of Small Sticks." The poles and the platform had been battered down, probably by a moose which had got its horns entangled, or that had just felt naturally on the prod. Wolves and probably wolverenes had finished the job. Dirtied sacks that once had held flour, were in fragments. A few shreds only showed that there had been ham and sowbelly encased in cloth. The beans had been strewed about and most of them eaten as well. Even the tin cans had been punctured by the teeth of ravenous beasts, and their contents stolen or ruined.

Without a word Crusty turned his back. He was too apathetic now to ask even if Bill knew the way from this cache to the *barabara*. Long ago Crusty had decided to himself that the *barabara* probably had few if any stores left. Crusty wandered back to where he had dropped his first armful of sticks, went down on his knees to pick them up, and then had some difficulty rising.

He swayed a little as he wandered back to the fireless camp. Bill was still out there somewhere. Mebbe he had caved. It didn't really matter much now. Another smoke or two or three with the old hod stuffed just right.

Crusty maundered out and laboriously gathered four more armfuls of small wood. It did not even cross his dulling mind that the wooden remnants of the cache would have kept them warm a whole night.

Of a sudden a clear thought came to him. He was failing fast. It never would do. If he carried through what he had in mind, he'd have to go far enough so Bill never would find him. He—

Crusty looked up, unconsciously tensing. Placidly pawing away the light snow with their splay hoofs as they grazed, a huge herd of caribou was drifting by. And there was Crusty starving, unable to use any sort of weapon to save his own life and that of his pardner!

That nearly ended the sourdough. He felt himself slipping into faintness, and made a grab for the pouch of jerky. Well indeed he knew Bill Nelson. One piece. Just one sliver—enough to take him a few miles away.

The chechako, stumbling back, discouraged, came to the fireless camp (Bill had carried their one remaining match), to find wood enough for the night piled up. On top of the wood was a flat pouch of moosehide. Bill looked at it, opened it. A scrawl on the back of a dirty envelope fluttered into his hand. He stared at it, with eyes that did not focus surely in the quick gathering dusk.

Find yer dam caben if ye can. I hope ye do.
Goodby. CRUSTY.

In the pouch was jerky, nearly four

pounds of it. Bill Nelson looked at it, and his face contorted, a sob rose in his throat. "Damn him! D-damn him!" he choked, and sprang erect, buckling on his webs again. He stopped to take the precious poke of jerky, lest wolves despoil it, but he did not eat any. In the fading twilight, his last fire still unlighted, Bill Nelson bent almost double as he hastened along the somewhat straggling trail of a man who had gone forth in high resolve to meet his God.

CHAPTER XI

TWO PARDNERS

A WIND came up at early sundown. Crusty looked at his back trail with unsteady, owlish approval. The sanding particles were wiping out the two-inch prints of his webs almost as fast as he made them. The temperature was moderating steadily; but that meant nothing to him. Before another sun rode the sky he would lie stiff and lifeless wherever he fell. Of course he would go on till he dropped. Crusty was made that way.

The accursed caribou crossed his path again. They stared at him from a distance of fifty yards. But Crusty was too far along the last trail now, to care much. He blinked at them and went on. They parted and gave him room as the first vestige of the hated man scent came to their nostrils. If he had kept his six-shooters, even, he might have downed one of them; but on the snow trail a man does not carry any more weight than is necessary. Both six-guns and rifles had gone down into the water of the creek, along with the huskies and the sled load of provisions, and their enemies.

Well, it could not matter now. Crusty stumbled on. A few miles more, mebbe, just so that young fool could not follow, or even chance upon him. Without even phrasing it in his own mind, Crusty was paying to the balance of Eternity, a great debt. He had choused two partners into doing him a dirty deal apiece, and long had suspected as much. This was a reckoning. Crusty was not now afraid to die, for he had a fair excuse. He was trying as well as any man could, to give Bill Nelson a chance for life. Back there outside, Bill had a girl, waiting for him. Crusty had no one. In all the world the opinion of Bill Nelson alone mattered and the tortures of the rack could not have wrung even that admission, earlier.

He was growing weaker, a great deal weaker. For a moment he stood still, swaying a little on his iced, tight strung webs. He might as well get rid of them; the snow seemed to be shallowing here. But he did not bother; what matter? He stumbled along. Now he was closing his eyes even as he walked. It made no different; just so he got a long enough way—a long—way—

Crusty said nothing aloud, even in a mumble, after that. The ghostly band of caribou, not at all afraid of him, crossed his path again, stared at him as he passed. He did not even see them, this time. His eyes were closed. He was a man walking in a dream, a dream that came not in sleep but on the threshold of death.

Twice he stumbled and fell. Each time slowly, mechanically he roused, clambered unsurely erect, went on. The shuffle of his snowshoes became a dragging. Times he almost fell, with no obstacle to make him stumble. Chin had sunk to chest; and his eyes were closed wearily now. On—a little farther—and then, rest.

Of a sudden he stumbled against some obstruction, falling forward. But he did not go to the snow. Instead his involuntarily outstretched hands encountered a snowy hill of some kind. He managed to keep himself erect. A small hill; his hands came to the top of it. Underneath the snow was sphagnum moss. Uninterestedly he opened his reddened eyes a little.

Then he stood there blinking, swaying on his webs. It was not to be believed. In this man deserted snow waste, where probably there was not one cabin for every two hundred square miles, he had stumbled upon a *barabara*—a rough dugout turf house!

Crusty's brain offered him no explanation then. But he knew his North. He made a painful way around, found a solid door, for a wonder, and broke down the icing by lunges of his body.

It was dark and cold inside. No one had lived here for months. Groping about, however, his webs still on his feet, he came upon a rude fireplace. And there were packs and packs of sulphur matches, piled at one side. Were they ruined?

Fumbling, breaking two, Crusty finally got one bubbling sulphur stick lighted. Wood enough to last at least a week was piled there at his feet!

"Bill's cabin," Crusty said in awed wonderment. "It's gotta be Bill's cabin!"

He managed to start a fire. Then by that light, sufficient for the whole interior of the crude shelter, he found a shelf upon which were some biscuits, iron hard with frost. Whimpering in near-delirium, Crusty fell upon one of them, gnawing. When he found he could not make any headway he pushed all three of the biscuits near the flames to heat.

There was a plate of uneaten beans left there on the shelf, and a cracked cup of something which might once have been coffee. During ensuing moments the famished sourdough finished all in sight and doubtless was fortunate that it was small in amount.

With a sigh of disappointment then he flopped down on one of the two unmade bunks—and immediately turned. Underneath the blanket was something hard, unyielding. He threw aside the dirty blanket, uncovering the greatest prize of all, a Spencer carbine!

It was loaded. Rooting around, Crusty found a box of cartridges, too. He tried the action. The rifle nearly kicked him silly, but the barrel did not explode, as he had expected it might. Reloading, he *flap-flapped* to the door, opened it, and stepped out.

There within sixty yards, bunching now as they herded for the night, was the band of caribou which had seemed to follow him!

Crusty dropped to one knee. His hands wobbled, so he took a rest against the side of the turf house. A tongue of flame leapt out into the moonlight. Then—after a few seconds—another. One big animal fell threshing. A second dropped as if pole-axed. The rest scudded away, whiffing aloft their frosty breath in frightened question.

Dropping his gun, Crusty ran out, pulling open his small jackknife as he came. He slashed at the hide of a haunch. Before the animal's last unconscious reflexes had entirely disappeared, Crusty had torn away a long strip of the smoking meat, and borne it inside. A moment later it was spitted in the flames.

BILL Nelson moaned and groaned after the first of that hot broth passed his lips. He wriggled faintly and shrank from the snow rub given his bared limbs. But though still unconscious he was not far gone, as Crusty determined, after the long, dragging trip back to the *barabara*. They both were safe now, and Bill would pull through. Crusty was happier than he had been in fifteen years.

Bill finally opened his eyes, smelling the superlatively delightful odor of roasting meat. He turned his head, to see his sourdough pardner engaged in the messy—but to them both, truly beautiful—task of skinning two huge carcasses of caribou. This meat would keep them a long time; and then, if necessary, Crusty probably could kill more. A rusty skillet was on the dying embers, sizzling away.

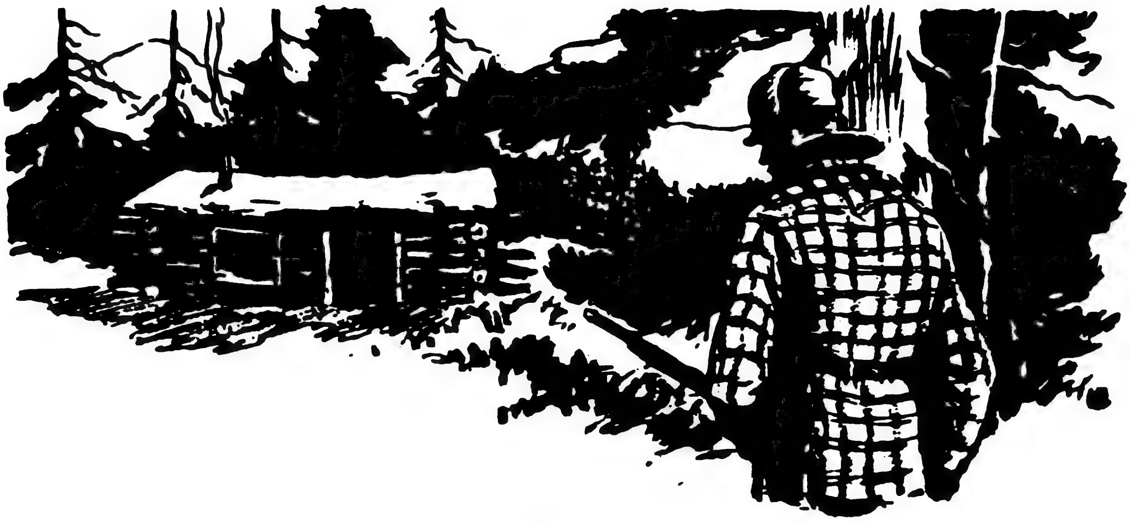
Bill turned his head. A wan smile curved his lips. "There's some flour, baking powder, beans and things there in a box in the wall, pardner," he said weakly, nodding toward a rough cupboard which Crusty had not had time to investigate.

Immediately Crusty sprang up, bringing more of the caribou broth, which Bill drank thankfully.

"Huh," said Crusty in feigned savageness—he had seen the untouched pouch of jerky, "I found yo're damn' camp after all! Now, when yuh get strong, d'yuh s'pose yuh can find the gold?"

"The pudding stone?" grinned Bill. "Yes, I think so. It's just outside the door. There's some of it in there with the beans. But I don't care so much about gold, Crusty; honest I don't any more. I've found something a whole lot more valuable."

"Mph! The hell yuh say!" growled Crusty, turning back to the fire to hide the sudden shine in his eyes.



Tiger Belle

A Tale of the Black Hills

By

FRANCES HALLEY BROCKETT

IT WAS November in the Black Hills. Joe Mack slipped quietly through the tangle of pine and spruce flanking Big Scraggly Creek, with his high power rifle in the crook of his arm. For Joe was hunting deer, ostensibly. But if anyone cared to notice, there was his six-shooter, too, strapped to his right leg, just above the high boot. But that was the custom in the Black Hills. In Rapid City that morning, when he had gotten his license to hunt big game, he had, at the same time, taken the precaution of having himself sworn in as a deputy sheriff.

"You must be gettin' a pore shot!" a lounger in the office had snickered, "what you goin' to do, arrest yore buck this year?" The sheriff winked.

"Arrest a buck is right, eh, Joe? Be sure you don't bring in no doe though. It's agin the law, and I'd have to arrest you!" Then they had all guffawed. Well, they knew why he was out to "get" Steve Harp. Let them laugh. He could stand it. And they didn't know all, not by half! He smiled grimly as he headed into the rough trail away from Big Scraggly. This ought to take him past the deserted cabin, up to the Sweet Home Lode. Then he'd see if Tiger Belle had lied to him. He wasn't the fool about that girl that he used to be, in spite of those snickering jack-asses at the sheriff's office. He wouldn't be on this hunt now, no matter how much she had egged him on, if it hadn't been for what she told him about the mine.

But as Joe picked his way along the precipitous out-crop of creamy limestone, he remembered the way Belle Lakyar had looked when he had been courting her. He wasn't a poet, but well, a flame and a dusky rose, flashing eyes and pouting lips—Gosh! She had been a wild one, but pretty! That was only five years ago, and look at her now! When he had seen her in that little back room last night, she had made him kind of uneasy. She said Steve Harp had ruined her life—but she didn't look it. Hard and bold, well, she was a woman, now, and that kind of wildness didn't set so well on a woman! But he'd promised her—after he'd gotten Harp—Joe stopped suddenly on the trail. My Gol! He'd better be careful what he was getting into! Mebbe they was some cause for all that snickering of the boys! But he shrugged his shoulders uneasily and went on.

Joe worked his way around an out-thrust

shoulder of rock and went slower. From the next bend, he could be able to look across a clearing to the deserted cabin on the edge of the Limestone, the cabin that had been Steve Harp's before he had bolted. He proceeded cautiously; no use rolling any more stones than he had to, and stopped by a clump of pines on the edge of a thicket.

Jumping Jehosaphat! The cabin wasn't deserted! A column of smoke wavered up from the squat chimney and made a smear of grey across the pale sky. Could Harp himself be there? He might have figured this as the last place they'd look for him, but, no! He might sneak back, but it wasn't likely he'd advertise himself. He wouldn't risk a smoke, daytimes. Some deer-hunters, probably had taken over the cabin to camp in.

How pretty the cabin looked sitting there so cozily on the little wooden bench that ran back from Little Scraggly Creek. The peeled pine logs had weathered to a warm rose and yellowy-brown, and the red roof was almost hidden by the great pine branches of a single mammoth tree that towered close to the log wall.

"If the lightnin' ever struck that tree!" murmured Joe, and remembered how they'd warned Steve when he built, but he had said that Belle liked the tree there. He certainly was soft on her in those days. What could have happened? Joe's brows knit in troubled thought.

Steve Harp had built that cabin, Joe remembered, when they both were courting Belle. She was almost promised to Joe, but Steve said the cabin would fetch her. A little home had fetched Tiger Belle, that dusky daughter of a Hungarian gypsy father, and a mother who was French Canadian and Sioux Indian, with a bit of a brogue away in the offing. Of all the men who were dazzled by the alluring Tiger Belle, only two ever wanted her for wife, Joe Mack, the burly and rough woodsman, her logical and adequate mate—Joe thought, and that easy-going good-natured blonde giant, Steve Harp, who had a little placer claim up in the Limestone, and washed out gold as he needed it.

She had taken Harp and his cabin. They had seemed happy, too, at first. Joe didn't know much about it, for he had hit for the timber right after the marriage, and been gone most ever since. But last night Belle had told him what a devil Harp had turned out to be. She laid it all on the Sweet Home Lode. Steve had struck a rich quartz vein, off up the draw, after they'd been married a couple of years. He named it the Sweet Home, and someway, after that, the only sweet home there was around there was in the name of the mine. The neighbors said the trouble was with Belle who wanted to sell out and go to the city, but Belle herself had told Joe that Steve had started in drinking something fierce, and beating her up. That big, blonde, good-natured Harp beating up Tiger Belle! But she insisted he had, and finally it drove her to desperation and that's why she had run off with the hired man from the next ranch.

Joe gathered that Belle had expected Harp to follow them, and do something desperate. Certainly that was the time to do the shooting if there was going to be any done. But what had Harp done but sent them his congratulations and a wedding present of a thousand dollars and a Ford car. He had told them to go on a long wedding trip, and keep on going just as long as there was any place left. Something queer about that!

Joe sighed heavily. He looked around and picked out a good seat on a nearby boulder. He had decided to wait until dusk, and then investigate the cabin and see who its occupants were. If it should be Harp after all!

JOE guessed Harp must have gotten tired of Belle. But worse, that sneaking skunk of a hired man; even Belle admitted he was that, had taken Steve Harp's advice and gone off with the money and the car—but alone! He had left Belle stranded in a little hotel down the line. She had managed to make her way home, and then. Well, to quote Belle, "There had been hell to pay!" She said Steve in his jealous wrath had not only gotten drunk and beaten her up, but he had then gone off in search of the hired man, dragging Belle along with him. They had found him in a little town in Wyoming, and, Belle said, Steve had walked right up to him, and without giving him a word of warning, had shot and killed him.

That was a week ago, and the sheriffs of several counties had been hunting for him ever since, and hunting at the same time for the body of the hired man, for that had disappeared with Harp. What's the use of catching the murderer if you can't establish the corpus delicti? Right after the shooting, Belle had fled shrieking to the police. They had gone with her to the room, and sure enough, there was the blood, still wet on the floor—Belle had related the details of the shooting to them in grisly detail—Steve must be a horrible brute, under all that seeming good-nature. But the body and the murderer and the Ford car were all gone, and hadn't been heard of since.

How still it was out here! Joe wanted a smoke terribly, but he didn't dare risk it. Suddenly a five-point buck came into the clearing and stopped to listen. What a beauty! A perfect standing shot not a hundred feet off. Mack lifted his rifle and aimed carefully. Then he remembered, and lowered his gun. Confound being a deputy-sheriff anyway. He swore under his breath as he watched the deer walk away into the thicket. He probably wouldn't get another shot like that this season. But, if Steve was in his cabin, no use warning him. Belle had given Joe a hint about the mine. She said Steve had gone there and Joe had come to see the murderer brought to justice—he sort of hoped it wouldn't mean hanging, Steve had always been such a good-natured cuss, and that hired man was a skunk. Then Belle would be a widow.

One husband shot, and one hung for murder—Joe wasn't squeamish, but—

At about four a man came out of the cabin to get some wood. But Joe couldn't be sure. It was already growing dusk, a light snow had begun to fall, and Mack got up from his rocky seat, and walked silently back and forth on the carpet of dead pine needles. He was getting chilled. In a half hour, it would be dark enough, so that he could get up to the cabin without being seen. And this snow would deaden any crackling his feet might make. It wouldn't be wise to wait any longer than he had to. Steve himself, might try to sneak away—if it was Steve.

How black it grew there in the midst of the pines. Ah, a flicker of light in the cabin window. Gosh almighty! That fellow must feel sure of himself; there weren't any curtains at the windows, and with the light inside, it would be a cinch for Mack to do all the reconnoitering he cared to, before he showed himself. It couldn't be Steve in there after all!

Joe turned his back to the cabin, and under the shelter of his coat, struck a match and looked at his watch. Quarter to five. He blew out the match and prepared to go. He fastened his deer rifle in the strap on his back, out of harm's way. Then he drew his six-shooter from its holster, and gun in hand, made softly for the little hut.

Cautiously he worked his way down the slope and across the wooded bench, stopping now and then to listen. But not a sound came from the lighted cabin.

Once he stopped suddenly, and held his breath. He was sure he had heard the sound of voices. What if Steve had someone with him? Or it must be hunters after all! But he hadn't seen any men's tracks leading away from the cabin and hunters would be hunting. He hadn't seen a single track since he had left Big Scraggly and crossed over Shark's Head. Little Scraggly, after all, was fairly inaccessible. Steve had to pack all his stuff in by mule.

At length Joe reached a window and peered through. Not a soul was in the room as far as he could see, and the room comprised the cabin. In the middle was the big fireplace, with its stone chimney, and on the back of the chimney, the kitchen range. That corner was the kitchen. If anyone was there, he was behind the Indian blankets in the other corner, where the bed was curtained off from the rest of the room. He guessed the fellow must have stepped outside.

Suddenly Joe sensed someone behind him. He didn't know whether he had heard anything or not, but he whirled quickly and jumped sideways from in front of that square of lighted window. Just in time too. Crash! A bullet whizzed past his head and buried itself in the casement.

Joe huddled against the log wall, and moved slowly along it toward the corner. It was absolutely dark now, and his eyes were dazzled from gazing into the lighted room, so that he couldn't see a thing. He felt his way toward the big tree. He thought he must be visible to anyone out there in the dark, but all was silence again.

Ah! He had reached the big pine. He stepped behind it with a surge of relief. From this vantage point, he peered intently into the gloom about him, but still he could see nothing. The stillness was absolutely unbroken. Suddenly the back door swung open with a bang, and Joe swung about, six-shooter ready. Inside the lighted doorway, peering out, loomed the huge bulk of Steve Harp, the murderer. Joe's heart almost stopped beating, but instantly he realized the man was not armed.

"WHAT in Blue Blazes!" Harp began "Why Joe Mack! My God, I thought it was some dude deer-hunter using my cabin for a target. Thought maybe he seen one of my mounted heads through the window!" Steve chuckled, "But what in all tarnation are you pointing that thing at me for?"

Then Mack remembered, "Steve, you're under arrest!" he said. "That wasn't no deer rifle that peppered your cabin, that was a—"

Bang! A bullet hit the door just over Harp's head "Thunderation!" Joe snapped. "They're shooting at you, now. A minute ago it was me." Both men jumped inside the cabin and closed the door.

"Then that wasn't you shot my cabin?" Steve said.

"I thought it was you—shooting at me from behind." Joe answered.

"But why in hell'd I be shootin' at you?"

"Well—you're a murderer, ain't you?"

"Murderer! Are you trying to pull my leg? What was it you said you was going to arrest me for?"

"For the killing of the hired man." The look of amazement on the face of Steve Harp bewildered Joe. "That must be natural," he thought, "Steve ain't sucha good actor as that!"

"My God!" said the dumbfounded giant. "For murderin' the hired man!" Say! Is that what Tiger Belle told you? And you're out here to arrest me, eh?"

"You bet I am. And I'm not the only one looking for you. The sheriffs of three counties have been looking for you for a week."

"No!" shouted Harp, and burst into an outrageous guffaw. "Man, I've been right here ever since the—ever since. So they want me for murder, eh? Did they, er—find the body of the man I murdered?" A hollow groan from behind the curtains startled Joe.

"What's that?" he whispered.

"Nothing," said Steve, "But, say, we better blow out that light. Whoever was shooting got two pretty targets in here now. And if I don't miss my guess, you'll be the one she aims at, cause she's kind of fond of me after all!"

"She!" gasped Joe Mack.

"Sure! Who knowed you was coming out here after me? Who would a followed you?"

"My God!"

"No, not exactly," Harp grinned, "more like your devil. So you got the murderer, but you ain't got any corpus delicti I bet!" There was another groan, but just then Harp moved quickly out from behind the sheltering chimney and blew out the lamp. Mack felt it was a trap. He backed into a corner and waited with leveled gun. He could hear Harp lumbering about the room going to first one window and then another.

"There!" Steve grunted at last, "I guess we ain't such blasted targets, now!" And he struck a match and lighted the lamp again.

Mack noticed that Steve had closed shutters which were fastened on the inside of the windows. "Think you was expecting a siege," he muttered.

Steve chuckled. "I bolt em on the inside when I'm away prospectin'," he said. "This country ain't what it used to be. Too many dudes. Steal you blind." And he began to laugh. "Got yore papers'n everything, to arrest me all correct?" he asked.

"Sure."

"And what evidence is there against me?"

"Well, I don't reckon I'm the one to tell you that. But remember there was an eye-witness, and a lot more that seen the blood."

"Well," said Steve not at all put out, "did she say I killed him?"

"Yes, and lead the sheriff to the spot. The blood wasn't dry yet. But you was pretty slick. Too quick for 'em, Steve. You must a been in a hurry, and to think of your waiting to get rid of the corpus delicti." A commotion from the curtained corner interrupted him. Mack glanced apprehensively toward the swaying curtains, and as he looked, the curtains parted, and a grim apparition stood swaying there. Mack stared at the pasty face with amazement.

"Heh, you," whined the figure, "don't you go callin' me the corpse derelict agin. I can't stand no more o' that."

"Gosh almighty! He ain't dead!"

"Get back to bed," shouted Steve, "or you'll be a corpse sure enough." The hired man groaned and disappeared.

"So you didn't kill him, eh? Just winged him."

"Too bad to disappoint you, you with your papers an' all," said Steve, "but I never shot him at all. Tiger Belle—"

"What! You going to accuse her?"

"Not any! She—" Suddenly there was a pounding on the door, and a shrill voice screamed. "Let me in there, you sufferin' idiot. Let me in my own house I tell you!" Joe gasped, but Steve signaled him to be quiet.

"You can't come in, Belle—not while you're on a shooting spree—I'm sick and tired of your jamborees."

"Now Steve," the voice pleaded. "I got something awful important to tell you. I'll empty my gun and toss it in to you. Come on, Steve."

"What you got to tell me?"

"It's about Joe Mack. You know he's been crazy jealous ever since I took you—an—been threatenin'. Aw, come on, let me in, I can't talk from out here."

"All right. Pitch in your gun," and Steve beckoned to Joe to hide behind the blanket curtain—"with the corpse derelict," he whispered. Mack was dumbfounded. He couldn't believe his ears. Why Belle had urged him to come out. He'd never threatened Steve in his life! His thoughts were in a tangle as he made his way to the curtained corner and sat on the edge of the hired man's bed.

Then Belle was in the room, and from the sound of it, making violent love to Steve who was resisting her advances.

"Hurry. Give me your gun, Belle," said Steve.

"Aw, honey, you ain't afraid of a woman—"

"No," said Steve drily, "only of a gun!" Then Tiger Belle threw herself passionately at her husband, and poured forth such a torrent of incoherence, that it made Joe ache.

"Steve!" she cried, "Take me back! I'm glad that damn hired man killed himself. I'd a done it if he hadn't." Here, the man in the bunk shook so, that he nearly unseated Joe.

"Steve," Belle's voice ran on, "I come here to save you, honest to Gawd I did! That Joe Mack is back, crazy-mad, cause someone told him you had been abusing me. You know how jealous he was of us, and he started out this way—to get you. When I heard, I come to warn you—"

"Is that why you tried to shoot me when I was standing in the door?" asked Steve facetiously.

"Honest to Gawd, Steve, I thought that was Joe. I thought he'd gotten here ahead of me."

"You mean it didn't make any difference to you which one of us it was, eh? You thought we'd kill each other off, and if we didn't, you'd finish up the job and pretend we had. Then the Sweet Home Lode would belong to you—"

"You devil!" shrieked Belle, and she must have jumped at him, for there was the sound of a tussle. Joe took the chance to lean over the hired man and ask.

"Did you—shoot yourself?"

"Sure," the man whispered back, "Harp, he brought that tiger cat back to me, and he says I had run off with her so I had to keep her. It's more'n I could stand. So I shot myself, and he brought me here, nursin' me, cause he says I can't die on him, and leave her on his hands. What's the use a gettin' well if I got to take that tiger woman off somewhere? My Gawd I can't stand it—"

"Who's back o' that curtain?" said Tiger Belle suddenly.

"Just a old sweetheart o' yours—oh yes—and the corpse derelict. You can take your choice between them—" But Joe was at the window fumbling with the shutter.

"No you don't!" shrieked the hired man. "Steve! Steve! He's tryin' to crawl out on us!"

Steve said, "Take yore choice' an' that lets me out—" The curtains were jerked back violently.

"He ain't dead!" yelled Belle.

"No thanks to you," muttered the hired man.

"Well, excuse me for butting in, I didn't understand the situation," said Joe, oilily, "I got to be goin' now—"

"No you don't!" said Steve grimly. "You think you can walk off and leave her on our hands after getting her out here?"

"But she's your wife," pleaded the deputy sheriff, "at least the wife of one o' you—"

"I have reasons to believe she wasn't never rightly married to me," said Steve, "but I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll chip in half if you'll go fifty-fifty and Belle and the—corpse derelict can go on their trip."

"You're on!" said Joe.

"Not me," said the hired man. "I

couldn't stand it. I'd shoot myself again."

"Who wants you?" snarled Belle, "I'm promised to Joe here."

"That's off," said Joe, "You told me Steve killed the hired man and was hiding in the tunnel of the Sweet Home Mine. That the mine was in your name, and that he was stayin' there on purpose so you couldn't take possession—"

"I see!" said Steve, "and when Joe arrested me and married Belle, he'd have the mine, too—all hunky."

Joe was overwhelmed. "The devil—" he muttered.

"Never mind," said Harp, "I know Belle. She ain't happy unless she's stirring up trouble. You and me was always friends, Joe. What say we go partners in the Sweet Home. I ain't got enough to develop her, alone. With Tiger Belle out of the country—"

"I ain't takin' her out I tell you!" squealed the hired man.

"Shut up," said Belle, "Joe—"

"No thank you," said Joe, "I'm taking up Steve's offer—"

"Coward," sneered Belle, "Steve's the only man—"

"Cut it out Belle, I'm through."

Belle rolled her fine dark bold eyes: "Well," she hissed, "this is most like old times, ain't it. All you gents fighting over me! Well—you can all go to hell—

Bang! the door flew open with a crash, and a new-comer strode into the little cabin.

"My Gol!" said Steve. "The woods is full o' them this evenin'."

The newcomer, tall and dark and lithe as a panther stood for a moment surveying the group. His dark eyes burned and beautiful white teeth gleamed at them. But somehow that smile seemed ferocious.

"Juan!" shrieked Belle.

The gypsy reached over, and with a graceful but forceful gesture, grasped the girl by the shoulder and pulled her over to him. He stood there, with her in the shelter of his arm, with one brown hand poised meaningly on a long shining knife in his belt.

"This my woman," he said, with a strange musical accent.

No one disputed him. They were enthralled at the picture they made. The two savage, colorful gypsies, standing there together in the flickering light made a vivid pulsing maelstrom in that rude cabin. Color, yes, and even beauty surged back to the woman's lips and eyes.

"Good night," murmured Juan and backed out into the night with Tiger Belle.

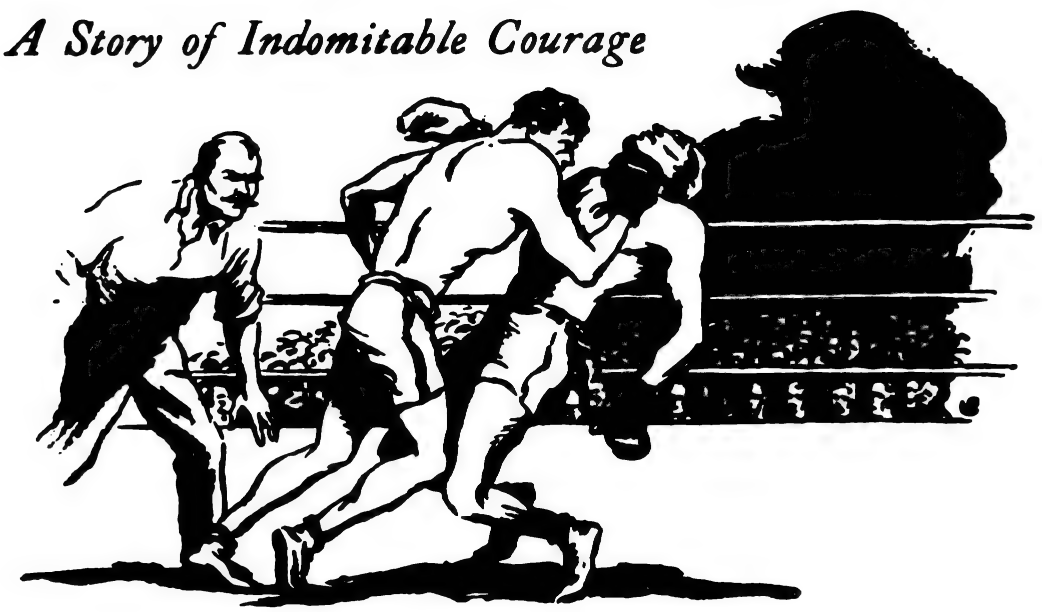
The three in the cabin remained tense for some minutes. Then Steve glanced at Joe and they grinned slowly.

"Does it go—about the mine?" said Joe at last.

"Surest thing you know," said Steve.

Then suddenly the "corpse derelict" came to life. He began to laugh in a high shrill cackle, to laugh and laugh. "My God," he sputtered at last. "My God, she's found her mate. Tiger Belle has found another tiger. And he thought he was taking her away from us." Then he sobered. "Gents," he says, "if it's all the same with you, I'll stay and work for the new Sweet Home."

A Story of Indomitable Courage



May the Best Man Win

By WALTER W. LIGGETT

"THEY'S three thousand bucks in it for yuh, Jerry. Three grand and yer training expenses. Maybe more if yer reasonable. And from what I hear, you can use the money, eh?"

The promoter's wheedling voice trailed away. He lighted a fresh cigar and winked as he held the match for his companion on the plush couch.

Jerry Sullivan's shaggy brows knit with perplexed uncertainty as he stared out the window of the dingy little parlor towards the yard where his wife was playing with the baby. His three year old son, with his father's stubborn jaw and touselled sandy hair, sat on his knee gazing in wide eyed wonder at the two strangers.

Yes, he could use the money. In fact he must find at least $2,000 before the first of the year if he was to save the little garage business in which he had invested the pitiful residue of the fortune he had made and squandered before he married Annie Morrison and retired from the ring. He wondered if they knew. It had been a bad year among the fruit raisers of this California Valley and he had suffered with the rest. The business was here; he might easily have met the mortgage he had so optimistically assumed if only he could collect his outstanding bills; but he couldn't, and at first, when he listened to this amazing offer that he return to the ring, he felt that Kearney and Morgan had appeared in answer to his almost hopeless supplications.

Yet he hesitated. He had promised Annie when their son was born that he would never fight again, and now after three years of pugilistic inactivity, he realized, even if he could overcome her objections, that he was in no condition to fight—certainly not fit to meet "Tiger" Donnelly. He was only thirty-six; his erect carriage, firm muscles and trim torso made him look even younger; but thirty-six years was old for that strenuous game; and he had been aged prematurely by the unavoidable hammerings of nearly two hundred battles in the squared circle.

Even Annie didn't know that when he had applied for a life insurance policy only six months before the examining physician had warned him he was threatened with Bright's disease as a result of the blows he had received over the kidneys before this merciless and senseless body clubbing at close quarters had been abolished by the rule makers of fistinia.

Sam Langley, the negro, probably was responsible for that. He recalled their savage thirty-two round fight, a fight to the finish. He had won; had left the ring comparatively unscarred while Langley's face was beaten into a bloody pulp; but he had bled internally for weeks after and never had felt the same. That fight was still discussed in bated whispers as a classic of the ring, and he had beaten a man whom two champions had dodged; but he knew it had definitely marked his pugilistic peak. True, he had fought the champion two years afterwards—held him to a draw, too—but he wasn't as good a man that night as when he beat Langley. If he had been, well, he would have won the championship. It was his only chance at the title and it had come too late.

Disjointed memories of a dozen former fights flashed back in his memory, clear as pictures on a screen. Unconsciously his muscles flexed, his pulse beat faster, and he edged forward on his chair with legs braced as if ready to respond to the sound of the gong.

Kearney's voice recalled him to reality. He actually had forgotten the presence of the promoter and Tiger Donnelly's manager. With a start he turned his gaze from the window to face them with an embarrassed laugh.

"How about it?" Kearney impatiently repeated. "Do you want this Christmas present we're trying to hand yuh? Yes or no?"

Something in the man's peremptory manner alarmed Sullivan's son and he began to whimper softly, clinging close to his father. The fighter gently eased the child off his knee.

"Run out and play with mama, Sonny," he directed, stroking his head, and not until the child had departed did he turn to his visitors.

"Christmas present," he laughed grimly. "Fighting Tiger Donnelly isn't my idea of a Christmas present."

"Three grand goes with the beating," Morgan retorted brutally. "You can buy a lot of court plaster with that."

"Five years ago *he'd* have needed the court plaster," Sullivan flared, flushing angrily. "I'd have gone around him like a cooper around a barrel."

Morgan grunted non-committally, for the promoter had nudged him warningly, and Kearney prefaced his next remark with an ingratiating smile.

"Maybe you can still do it, Jerry," he suggested. "I was looking up your record the other day and I noticed nobody ever tagged yuh for the long count."

Once more the mental pictures flashed through the fighter's mind. Yes, he had been a good man once. One of the very best. The fans and the papers had called him "The Old Master" and champions had dodged him in the days when champions were fighters instead of moving picture stars. If only he had been born ten years later and got some matches in this era of princely purses! Or met Annie ten years earlier and saved more of his own by no means insignificant winnings! But a man could not fight forever. It was a game for youth; a game where youth inevitably would be served; a game where cunning and ring craft went for nought once a man's eyes were dimmed and his swift reactions dulled by time. Unconsciously he sighed.

"Thinking of old times?" Morgan asked. "Well, come back and show us how you used to do it, Jerry."

Come back! No, a man couldn't come back, not at his age; not after he had been out of the ring nearly three years. And certainly not in his condition. It would be folly to fight. Annie would never consent. No, it was only a dream; a tantalizing, torturing dream, but he frowned even as he shook his head, for he knew how desperate their financial situation was and the offer of this unexpected purse spelled the difference between business success and almost inevitable bankruptcy.

He bit his lips as he stared again out in the yard where his wife was romping with the children. She doubtless was wondering who these two strangers were and why they were closeted with him so long. But she didn't know and neither did she know that he might lose the garage she had suggested buying. She had been so happy in this, their first little home, that he hadn't had the heart to worry her.

"We'll give yuh five grand, Jerry," Kearney interrupted, "but that's the limit."

Five thousand dollars! It would save his business and give him a comfortable bank account besides. It was madness for him to think of fighting again—especially such a mauler as Tiger Donnelly—but it was madness to refuse.

SUPPOSE he had promised her not to fight? He had meant it, too, but how could he have predicted this blight which had spoiled the peach crop? He had worked hard enough; it was no fault of his that he could not collect outstanding bills. The thought of losing his business and his home had worried him for months until he felt as if an iron band were pressed about his brow. This offer seemed a veritable godsend. He was good for one more fight. Promise or no promise he would accept. Later, after she had heard the whole story, he would square things with Annie.

"Well?" Kearney queried. "How about it Jerry? Are you on?"

Sullivan nodded.

"Good!" the promoter cried, gripping his hand. "I thought you'd come across, Jerry, for a purse this size."

"How'd you come to pick on me?" the old fighter asked, looking steadily from one to the other. Morgan laughed unpleasantly.

"It's this way, Jerry," Kearney explained. "Morgan, here, thinks he has a man-killer in this Donnelly. Between you and me he's good—there ain't no doubt about that. I think he can take the champ right now, but the trouble is the champ seems to think so, too. Leastwise, he won't fight him.

"Well, you fought a draw with the champ and it wasn't so long ago, neither. And everybody that seen the fight said you had the best of it. Even the papers was beefin' about the decision. Well, supposin' the Tiger cleans you in jig-time?"

"He won't clean me in jig time," Sullivan blurted hotly. "I've fought better men than him."

"I know, Jerry," Kearney soothed, "but that was when you was younger than you are now. You could have trimmed this boy all right when you was right. Now? No. You haven't a chance with him, Jerry, and they's no use of kidding yourself. He's too tough for you and too young."

"Why you matching us then?"

"Why, I was just telling yuh, Jerry. Morgan and me—yeh, I got an interest in the Tiger—want to force the champ into a match. He's been telling us to chase ourselves, to go get a reputation. Well, we figure that the Tiger can get a reputation easier by beating you than he can by barnstorming around the country and knocking over a lot of ham-and-eggers. Quicker, too. That's the low down on it, Jerry. You're a friend of mine. I won't bull yuh none. We're paying yuh this five grand for your reputation, the reputation you had when you quit the ring. It's worth cash money to us. The boob public won't know how far back you've gone, nor care. That damned dodging champion will find it hard to stall after the Tiger adds a K. O. over you in his record book. That's the straight dope, Jerry, and that's why we're offering you five grand. I thought you tumbled at first."

"Suppose he don't knock me out?" Sullivan asked.

"Leave that to the Tiger," Morgan broke in. "Don't you worry none about that."

The old fighter flushed, but bit his lips on an angry rejoinder.

"How many rounds?" he demanded.

"Twenty, Jerry."

"I can't go twenty rounds, Kearney," he protested. "You know damned well I can't."

"Sure, I know it, Jerry. Well, we're paying yuh five grand, ain't we?" he shrugged. "And you don't have to try to do half that. You can take a flop in two or three rounds if you want to. The sooner the better for us."

"He'll flop soon enough," Morgan added. "The Tiger'll attend to that."

"Is that why you're staging the bout in Tia Juana? So's you can make it twenty rounds?"

"No, it ain't only that, Jerry. The Tiger got into a jam with his wife. She was no good, so he busted her one in the jaw and quit her cold. Then she ups and sues him. Claims he deserted her. If we hold this bout in the state she'll claim alimony and tie up the gate. Anyhow, I guess she's got a warrant out for the Tiger. He's got to stay outside the state till we get things fixed. That's the low down on it, Jerry. Anyway, we can draw a good gate at Tia Juana. The ponies'll be running then and half of San Diego will motor down. They'll go anywhere to see the Tiger fight. He was raised there."

"I dunno why anyone in San Diego'd pay to see him fight," Morgan interrupted. "He done enough public fighting there to satisfy them, I should think. He got jugged there twice for busting cops."

"Anyhow, it's Tia Juana, Jerry, and you

needn't worry none about the gate. We're going to put some money down on the Tiger. You'll get yours before you climb into the ring."

"You'll get yours after you climb in, too," Morgan sneered.

"Aw, lay off," Kearney expostulated. "He's sore," he added, grinning at Sullivan, because we had to pay five grand to get yuh."

Once more Sullivan swallowed an angry retort.

"You'll train down there. We'll pay your expenses and furnish your sparring partners."

"And collect the training gate receipts," Sullivan interjected.

"Sure. Why not? We're treating you fair, Jerry."

"Why can't I train up here?"

"Publicity. It'll look better if you're down there and besides you couldn't get no training gate up here. We'll put the bout on just a month from today."

"That's not time enough," Sullivan protested. "I can't get in shape in a month."

"You won't have to go far," Kearney grinned. "All you need do is just go through the motions of training, just enough to fool the public and them sap reporters that calls themselves fight experts."

"Who's going to referee?"

"What in hell difference does that make?" Morgan interrupted roughly. Anybody that can count ten will do."

"Lay off, Morgan! Lay off!" Kearney commanded. "What in hell yuh sore about? Jerry's doing the right thing, ain't he? What are you beefin' about? Spike Skelly will referee," he added to Sullivan. "You know him."

"Yes, I know him," Sullivan said with bitter emphasis. He had reason to know Skelly. Four years before he had called Sullivan's fight with "One Round" Jackson a draw when Jackson was so badly beaten he could hardly walk from the ring. And aside from any personal bias, Skelly had the reputation of being able to hide a corkscrew. The Tiger was known as a foul fighter and he could get away with murder with Skelly the third man in the ring. But Sullivan left his protest unuttered and only shrugged. After all, Morgan was right. What difference did it make?

He couldn't win and he knew it. They were only buying his reputation. Once it had been his proudest, most cherished possession. He was one of the few men who had retired from the prize ring without a knockout against his record. He had been cheated out of the championship, but, unlike every champion of the past, he had never taken the long count. And he had fought real fighters, too. Three years ago he would have rather begged for his bread than to complete his long list of conquests with a crushing defeat. He would have begged for his bread now, but as his glance wavered out through the window to where Annie sang to his little son while the baby lay asleep in her lap his vision suddenly dimmed. It was hard, bitter hard, but his renunciation meant their security.

He kept his face averted until he dashed the tears from his eyes; then coughed to account for taking out his handkerchief.

"All right, I'll sign up," he agreed huskily, but he eyed Morgan steadily. "And I give you fair warning, Morgan, I'll bring out the yellow streak in that Tiger of yours. I never saw a bully who wasn't a coward. I'll beat him if I can."

"All right, you beat him—if you can," Morgan jeered. "The harder you fight the better. Then they won't think it's framed or that you're a push-over. Besides," he laughed again, "I don't mind yuh giving the Tiger a boxing lesson—for a couple of rounds."

Unconsciously, Sullivan sighed again. A couple of rounds was right. In his condition, with only a month's training and Spider Skelly as referee.

AS JERRY SULLIVAN steadily jogged along the winding, dusty road that led from Tia Juana to the foothills that surrounded the bowl-like valley, his heart was heavy with bitter reflections. He was dreadfully lonely, homesick as a child. It was the first time since his marriage that he had been away from Annie and the children and he fairly ached for their presence. Annie had written him only that morning. Angrily resentful at first, now she was standing loyally behind him after he had explained the financial necessity that had induced him to break his promise never to fight again, but the forced cheerfulness of her phrases did not disguise her underlying apprehension. Still, he was glad to hear from her and still gladder to receive the snap shot of the baby which she had enclosed.

He slowed his jog down to a walk, pulled the letter out of his pocket, and then, obeying a sudden impulse, sat down beside the road under the scanty shade of a clump of chaparral. Slowly he reread her letter and then sat gazing at the puckered face of his little girl. Well, he was doing it for Annie and the kids; and he would see them soon. The fight was only a week away. Only a week, but the days seemed to drag by as slowly as though he were confined in a death cell. For the first time in his career he was awaiting an approaching fight with dread instead of eagerness.

It was not the physical injury that he feared, but the humiliation of defeat. His long list of ring battles unmarred by a knockout was as precious to him as a medal of honor to a soldier. He had risked that record against many dangerous opponents in recent years. That very knowledge had always keyed him up to his best pitch of fighting efficiency. But this time he had no chance and he knew it.

Training had been a harder ordeal than he had anticipated. He was not fat, nor his sinews soft; hard and incessant work in his garage had kept him in fair muscular condition, but his wind was bad and the flaming, resilient energy of youth had gone forever. He could rally for brief savage spurts that left him panting, but now he couldn't recuperate in one minute's rest.

Curiously enough, he found he could box as well as ever. He was a trifle slower certainly and a little rusty at times in his judgment of distance, but on the other hand his defensive work was better than he ever remembered. He supposed it was his changed psychology. Once, proud of his ability "to take it" he had liked to bore in, content to receive a punch if he could deal one, but now he insensibly shrank from hard blows and called on his uncanny skill to avoid the swings of his sparring partners.

He could still punch, too, until he tired. Only the day before he had shot in a perfectly timed right cross that landed on "the button" and the two hundred pound youth who acted as his sparring partner clinched with blinking eyes and sagging knees although the blow travelled less than eight inches. But a few minutes of fast boxing with mediocre sparring partners left him puffing and leg weary and the coming fight was for twenty rounds against Tiger Donnelly. Well, he could only do his best and go down fighting!

He shrugged hopelessly. For all his dread of the certain humiliation that awaited him, it would be a relief to have it over and get back to Annie and the kids.

He was not old in years, but he was the last of an earlier and better and cleaner generation of fighters. He felt like an alien amid this crowd of promoters, managers, fighters and betting commissioners. How crooked they were!

Only the night before Kearney had sought him out and, on the plea of friendship, had urged him to bet his share of the purse on Donnelly.

"You haven't a chance, Jerry," he had argued, "and you might as well make ten grand as five. I'll advance you the purse now if you say so, providing you'll bet. I'm advising you as a friend."

"As a friend, hell!" Sullivan had spluttered. "You want to copper rivet your own bets. You know that if I bet the purse on Donnelly I won't dare to win."

"You don't think you can win, do yuh?" the promoter had asked with a curious glance.

"By God! I can try," Sullivan snapped, "and I'm going to try, Kearney. I've sold my reputation but I'll be damned if I sell out the public."

"You're a bigger damned fool than I thought you was, Jerry," Kearned had replied as he walked away. Sullivan wondered if he had not been right. But fool or not, he could not do otherwise.

He thrust his wife's letter back into his pocket and pulled out his watch. He was surprised to note that he had been lounging under the grateful shade of the chaparral for nearly half an hour. He should have been doing his daily stint of eight miles on the road. But, after all, what did it matter? A mile more or less of jogging would not help his wind much.

Even as he debated with himself, to his surprise, he saw a jogging figure coming along the road. As the runner drew nearer, Sullivan saw that despite the heat he was swathed in a tight fitting jersey and wore a cap, corduroy trousers and heavy running shoes. He had never seen Tiger Donnelly but photographs on the sporting pages of the newspapers had made his features familiar, and there was no mistaking the scowling brows, the beady close-set eyes, the high obstinate cheek-bones and the cruel mouth habitually twisted in a crooked snarl. His rival was also doing his road work and chance had brought them in the same direction.

As Donnelly approached, Sullivan stood up and greeted him with outstretched hand.

"Glad to meet you, Donnelly," he smiled. "I suppose we'll get better acquainted next Saturday."

Donnelly stopped short, ignoring the outstretched hand, and his black brows drew together in a scowl.

"So yer Sullivan, eh?" he snarled. Jerry nodded and withdrew his hand. This young ruffian aroused his instinctive antagonism, but he could not restrain a glint of impersonal admiration as he studied the younger man's lithe legs, thick neck, long, big-boned arms and wide sloping shoulders. Physically and temperamentally he was a born fighter.

"I understand you passed up a chance to make a piece of change by bettin' on me," Donnelly growled. "Think yer goin' to lick me, eh?"

"I'm going to try," Jerry smiled and the next instant something seemed to explode in his brain. He felt himself falling through a crimson mist streaked with shooting stars, and pitched forward at Donnelly's feet, unconscious, only his leg muscles twitching, as he lay face downward in the dusty road. For the first time in his life Jerry Sullivan had been knocked out and a referee could have counted ten thrice over him before he automatically struggled to one knee, still dazed and dizzy, and stared at Tiger Donnelly, who stood beside the road, grinning as he blew upon the knuckles of his massive right hand.

"Goin' to lick me, eh?" Donnelly jeered. "Well, that's just a taste of what yuh'll get next Saturday."

Hopeless, helpless, still half stunned and weakened, Sullivan knew he had no chance in a rough and tumble with this burly young brute. Discretion whispered to stay on his knees, but the unconquerable courage that was his by heritage and training, brought him reeling to his feet. He rushed on sagging knees and an instant later another blow stretched him senseless in the roadway

When Sullivan raised himself to a sitting position he was alone. Half a mile away he could see Tiger Donnelly loping along the road that wound up the foothills. The earth seemed to rise and fall in billows and the sky was whirling like a merry-go-round. Black spots were dancing before his vision and his head was throbbing as though a trip hammer were beating against his brain. A surge of almost insane fury brought Sullivan to his feet once more, but his legs were unsteady as a drunkard's. With a sob he stumbled back under the shade of the chaparral, flung himself prostrate and buried his aching head in his outflung arms.

An hour later Sullivan wearily trudged back to his training camp. His head still throbbed, and his eyes were blurred, but now the hatred that had left him shaken and nauseated was hardening into an inflexible resolve. He clenched his swollen jaw until his teeth ground together and as he lurched along with lowered head he muttered to himself.

"I'll kill him!" I'll kill him! I'll kill him!" he savagely repeated. "He thinks he's got my goat! By God! I'll get *his* goat. Now I *know* he's got a yellow streak and I'll find it. I'll kill him—kill him! Yes, by God! I'll kill him."

Insensibly his strides became longer and stronger. Now he was not looking forward hopelessly to certain defeat. Every atom of mind and body was fused in a passionate desire for victory and his first blinding rage was transformed into a cold, calculating determination that seemed to renew each flagging fibre with the energy of youth.

LURED by the carefully press agented accounts of Sullivan's reputation and Tiger Donnelly's man-killing prowess, fully twenty thousand persons were packed into the huge open air arena when Sullivan, after the semi-final, strode down the sloping aisle, followed by three seconds, and climbed through the ropes. It was mid-afternoon; a torrid sun blazed overhead; and most of the spectators were in their shirt sleeves.

There was scattered cheering as Sullivan walked across the ring to his appointed corner. The old fighter smiled grimly. Before his retirement other crowds had stood on their chairs with roof raising shouts when he entered the arena. Then he had been a "comer"—the potential champion. Now he was only a trial horse.

That faint applause was merely a perfunctory tribute to his record. The real cheering today would be for Donnelly, now the "comer," and Sullivan realized only too well that nine out of ten in the crowd anticipated his knockout. Once more he smiled grimly.

Yet the old warrior looked formidable as he sat in his corner, a bath towel draped across his shoulders, bandaged hands in his lap, eyes glinting from under his shaggy brows, coolly chewing gum and responding with smiles to the queries of the reporters at the ringside. He had been browned by the open air training and his muscles rippled under his skin. No one ignorant of his malady would have guessed his real condition. And there was a certain calm confidence in his manner that bred uneasiness in the mind of more than one of the speculatively inclined gentry who had wagered heavily on the Tiger at long odds.

The Tiger was still in his dressing room. Sullivan smiled. It was an old ruse to get an opponent into the ring first and make him wait. Often in the waiting, the scrutiny of the crowd, and the frustrated impatience unnerved young fighters. Well, it wouldn't unnerve him. He could wait a week if necessary. The even tempo of his gum chewing did not increase as he calmly continued his conversation with the reporters, nor did he so much as turn his head when a great billow of cheering told him that his young opponent was at last making his belated entrance into the ring. The spectators were standing on their chairs now, and the tumultuous applause continued after Donnelly ducked between the ropes and seated himself in his corner. A flash of bitter, ironic rage tightened Sullivan's jaw. They knew he was older and lighter, yet they hailed this brawny youth whose close cropped head was bobbing acknowledgments. Well, he would show them some fighting before he was through. They might cheer *him* before the finish.

The referee had bustled into the ring after the perfunctory introduction and the gloves were soon adjusted. Sullivan could feel the Tiger's baleful stare, but he carefully kept his own gaze directed towards the floor. It was part of his plan to let Donnelly think that he had been intimidated by that surprise attack on the road. He continued to keep his eyes averted when they were called to the center of the ring by the referee for the brief final instructions, yet for the first time in years he found himself quivering with suppressed eagerness. They were sent to their corners and stood limbering up by tugging at the ropes and pawing their soft soled shoes in the resin.

"Let her go—and may the best man win!" the announcer roared. Then the clang of the gong broke the tense silence and with a sigh of expectancy the waiting thousands settled in their seats.

The veteran shuffled forward and met Donnelly in the center of the ring. They sparred warily for a few seconds, circling about, each alert for an opening, and then Donnelly lashed out with his dreaded left hook. It landed, but too high on the cheek bone to do much damage, but Sullivan backed away while the Tiger, scowling menacingly, crowded him towards a corner. Again Donnelly shot in his left, but Sullivan ducked cleverly and the glove glanced off his skull while he groped his way to close quarters and entangled his opponent's arms in a clinch.

But for all his cunning, Sullivan could not cope with the gorilla-like strength of the younger man. He twisted the veteran sideways and clubbing his forearm, landed a vicious blow over the kidneys. Sullivan winced, but clung on, until Donnelly threw him back against the ropes by main strength and again they resumed their wary sparring.

Twice more Donnelly launched vicious left hooks, but steadily retreating, Sullivan cleverly rolled his head, avoiding the full force of the blows, and twice more the older fighter was twisted and mauled at close quarters. So far the veteran had not struck a blow and while he retained a rigid guard, his eyes, his whole appearance gave the impression of intimidated hopelessness. Already murmurs of disappointment were coming from the crowd and Donnelly, his mouth twisted into a snarl, savagely hissed, "Stand up and fight" when they went into the next clinch. Again Sullivan permitted himself to be clubbed over the kidneys without an attempt at retaliation until the referee made them break.

"Fight—fight—fight," the crowd was chanting in unison, but Sullivan resumed his steady retreat. With his left arm extended, right crooked to protect either jaw or body, and head held low so that the vulnerable jaw could instantly be dropped behind either high-hunched shoulder, he was as hard to get at as a turtle in its shell and only in the clinches did Donnelly's superior strength enable him to land those punishing body blows.

It takes two men to make a fight and when the round ended the derisive cheers of the spectators rang out, followed by a chorus of boos. Sullivan slumped on his stool, quietly submitting to the ministrations of his seconds, paid no heed, but he saw Donnelly, disdaining his stool, standing in the opposite corner pawing impatiently, like a spirited stallion, scowling blackly, while his gloved hands were clenched with rage.

That was precisely what Sullivan had counted on. Unable to match strength or endurance with this youth, he was calling into play all the cunning of fifteen years' ring experience. He had resolved to fight strictly on the defensive until the Tiger became carelessly contemptuous, and then he would dash in with all his carefully husbanded strength in an effort to beat down his adversary before he could recover from his astonishment.

The second round was almost a repetition of the first. Ducking, dodging, blocking, sidestepping, always going away with Donnelly's whizzing punches, Sullivan, while contriving to present the appearance of a beaten, frightened man, avoided or minimized the force of most of the Tiger's long range blows. But in those strength-sapping clinches, the younger man wrenched away from the veteran's detaining arms and repeatedly clubbed home his horrible smashes over the kidneys.

In vain Sullivan protested to the referee that these blows were foul.

"Stand up and fight then," the official snapped. "We ain't under boxing commission rules down here." And he purposely prolonged the clinches so that Donnelly could continue his body bombardment.

Already there was a red spot over Sullivan's left kidney, large and vivid as a bandana handkerchief, and despite his locked jaws he could hardly resist a groan at every blow. When the gong sent him to his corner he was puffing and his whole left side felt like a throbbing boil. As yet the veteran had hardly struck a blow and once more the great arena seemed to rock in a storm of boos and hisses.

"Fight! Fight!" pale faced, flabby men screamed furiously, standing on chairs with clenched, upraised hands. "Why don't you fight, you old has-been? What do you think we paid our money for?"

Donnelly, too, came in for his share of jeering for not "knocking out the old stiff" in a punch and as Sullivan stole a swift glance he saw the Tiger still standing in his corner, in a snarling altercation with his handlers.

Sullivan knew the youth was rapidly getting into a state where he would throw caution to the winds and inevitably leave an opening for a stunning punch, but as he sat on the stool with heaving sides and quivering legs, he realized with a poignant pang of self pity that his own strength was slipping fast. Two years ago he could have manoeuvered this scowling young brute into a position where he would have fallen a victim to a certain knockout, but now he could not afford to wait long for the perfect opportunity lest it find him too exhausted to reap its full advantage.

INDIFFERENT to the raucous jeers of the crowd; unmindful of his own seconds chattering in his ears as they sponged him off and frantically rubbed his legs, the old fighter slumped forward, eyes fixed on the floor, calmly taking stock of his physical resources, every thought concentrated upon the coming round's campaign. The brazen clamor of the gong cut short his meditations and, as his seconds hoisted him to his feet, he ruefully decided he must make his bid for victory within the next three minutes. He was still panting for breath after the minute's intermission. He must strike while he still had strength.

For the third time he gave ground before Donnelly's opening rush, ducking two short left hooks and cleverly sidestepping a smashing right. Then he was penned in a corner. Snarling with rage, Donnelly launched a hurricane assault, but Sullivan, cool, forestalling the other's every intention by an infinitesimal fraction of a second, blocked and dodged his way to the comparative safety of mid-ring. It was a beautiful exhibition of boxing: sheer skill against brute force—and a brute's lightning reactions—but instead of applause the crowd jeered the elder man and encouraged the youth with wild yells.

Again Donnelly weaved in and again Sullivan, drawing his blow with a sudden feint, sidestepped with the agility of a dancing master so that the younger man plunged headlong into the ropes. There was a roar of derisive laughter at this, and wheeling, his face convulsed with fury, Donnelly charged behind a flashing left.

But this time Sullivan did not glide away. Instead, ducking his head waist low, he shifted his feet swiftly and himself drove a terrible left to the body. He was aiming for the solar plexus, and, had his gloved fist landed squarely on that spot where the delicate nerve ganglia lie close to the surface of the body, neither courage nor hardihood would have saved Donnelly.

But he was not nicknamed "The Tiger" for nothing. He had a tiger's lightning reactions. His body twisted and instead of striking his solar plexus, Sullivan's fist crashed against his lower ribs. Even so, Donnelly staggered back, bent double with pain, a ghastly grimace contorting his face.

Instantly Sullivan leaped in with a smashing two handed assault. Weakened and surprised, Donnelly staggered backwards. Now it was Sullivan who attacked. His straight, crashing blows broke through Donnelly's guard and drove against his jaw, ribs and abdomen. The Tiger tried to leap back, but felt a strand of rope burn against his back. He reeled sideways and again a hempen barrier hurled him into a storm of blows. The crafty old warrior had postponed his coup until he had Donnelly in a corner, and now the Tiger was like a lamb in the slaughter pen.

"Clinch! Clinch! For Christ's sake clinch!" Donnelly's seconds were shrieking, and, although dazed by the furious flurry of blows, the Tiger lurched forward and tried to seize Sullivan. But Sullivan, temporarily the stronger, wrenched away, and, coolly measuring his man, drove home his murderous punches, grunting like a wood chopper, the pent-up fury of the past week behind each blow.

The spectators were standing on chairs, screaming, gesticulating, imploring, and the noise beat into the arena like the roar of a winter surf. The very air seemed to vibrate like some primordial lust, some atavistic, elemental fury tinged the ringside with a crimson aura.

Sullivan's set face, gleaming with sweat, shone austerely in the brilliant sun. His brows were furrowed with a desperate intentness. He seemed some engineer, far off, remote from any fray, impersonally guiding those flying fists that lashed out with the speed, force and precision of twin trip hammers. And Donnelly, conscious only of blinding flashes of fire as Sullivan's fists shocked home on his jaw, shaken, staggering drunkenly, suddenly slumped face forward to the floor.

Twenty thousand persons came to their feet with an amazed shout—then stood silent.

Panting, quivering like a frightened horse, Sullivan backed away and after one half incredulous glance, his battered face twisted into a triumphant grin. Donnelly lay like one dead. Only the muscles at the back of his thighs twitched spasmodically.

Then Sullivan saw the referee. He had emerged from a neutral corner and to the impatient old fighter it seemed that he strolled slowly as a man who views some pleasurable landscape. He waved Sullivan back to his corner and then leisurely turned and began to toll off the count over Donnelly. His rigid right arm seemed to rise and fall with the deliberation of a derrick.

Sullivan's heart sank. Instantly he realized that the referee was going to give Donnelly the "slow count"—an ancient device of partial ring arbiters—and he knew from experience that the stipulated ten seconds might be protracted into half a minute. And it would go unnoticed by the throng in the excitement—and who would protest even if he detected the deceit?

"Three—ee—ee—" the referee chanted, drawling out the vowel in the manner of a train caller. Sullivan knew that already ten seconds had elapsed. "Fo-o-o-u-u-u-u-r," the referee continued even more slowly, bending over Donnelly.

"Fi-i-i-i-i-i-i-ive!" His hand seemed poised in the air and he hissed like a steam engine as he prolonged the word "six."

Sullivan was choking with fury. He had won his fight! Donnelly already had been on the floor at least fifteen seconds! And this crooked skunk was depriving him of the victory!

"Se-e-e-e-v-e-e-e-e-n" Skelly intoned, his lips almost at Donnelly's ear, and now the import of his message seemed to penetrate the dazed fighter's brain. He stirred and automatically, like a giant mechanical doll partly unwound, his arms and legs made groping, swimming motions on the canvas floor.

"E-e-e-e-i-i-i-i-g-h-t" Skelly drawled, and suddenly with a galvanic movement, Donnelly drew one knee under him and teetered precariously, his gloved hands still on the floor. His head hung limply as though on a broken neck.

"N-i-i-i-i-i-i-n-e" the referee sang and it was all that Sullivan could do to restrain himself from dashing forward and striking him down. Donnelly's head was lifting, although his rolling eyes were filmy but the numbing effect of the hammering on his jaw was fast disappearing; his vitality was flooding back through every fiber, and like some stricken Frankenstein, obedient to the frenzied commands of his seconds, he began slowly rising to his feet.

Still, it is doubtful if he would have been erect at the count of "Ten" despite Skelly's best vocal assistance, had not the referee suddenly turned and observed that Sullivan, in his agonized impatience, had edged a few feet out of his corner.

"Back! Get back in your corner!" Skelly commanded, stopping his count to angrily wave at the fighter.

"Count! Count, you damned crook!" Sullivan screamed, forgetting discretion in his overpowering disappointment, but as Skelly turned to start the chant of "Ten," Donnelly, seizing one of the ringside ropes, hauled himself unsteadily to his feet.

At that instant Sullivan charged forward, but Skelly, pretending to trip, staggered against him, shielding Donnelly. And when Sullivan shouldered the referee into the ropes, Donnelly, obeying some instinct, dodged behind the official for another second's respite.

Sullivan was after him like a terrier after a rat, but the Tiger unsteadily bobbed under a glancing punch and clung to the veteran with the desperation of a drowning man. Although the referee pretended to be trying to drag them apart, he was holding Sullivan's right arm and cunningly impeding his punches. And once more the official purposely blundered between them at the break just in time to check Sullivan's rush.

Again the veteran rushed furiously, but now Donnelly's head was clearing rapidly. Protecting his jaw with crossed forearms, he wobbled backwards along the ropes until he had an opportunity to fall into another protracted clinch. And Sullivan, panting from his own efforts, could not break loose. They were locked at the gong. Its clamor was drowned in the pandemonium of twenty thousand screaming bedlamites but the referee and their seconds pulled them apart. Back in his corner the veteran sank back in his stool with heaving chest and gasped for air. Across the narrow patch of canvas he could see Donnelly's seconds frantically kneading his neck and legs, one holding an ammonia bottle under his nostrils, another applying a lump of ice to his head.

Sullivan's eyes closed with despairing weariness. He had won the fight only to be cheated out of victory by the referee's dishonest count. Donnelly would be fresher than he after the minute's intermission. Nor would the Tiger carelessly rush again. His advisers would instruct him to box cautiously until sheer fatigue spiked the veteran's guns.

But there was that in Sullivan which would not admit defeat, and when the gong clanged he dashed across the ring, hoping to pen Donnelly in his own corner. The Tiger, warned by his seconds, slipped along the ropes and as Sullivan followed, continued to dance away, fending off the veteran with a rigid left.

"Box him! Box him!" Donnelly's seconds were screaming, their frantic faces thrust between the ropes. "Bicycle, Tiger! Bicycle!"

In the idiom of the ring that meant to retreat and Donnelly obeyed. Twice Sullivan launched sudden, savage attacks, blow following blow with bewildering rapidity, but the Tiger, intent only on protection, ducked, dodged, always going backwards; clinched when he was cornered, and then clung to Sullivan like a leech in protracted grapples. When the round ended, in spite of the best Sullivan could do, the younger man had almost entirely recuperated from the effects of the stunning blows that had floored him for the count on the round before.

THE fifth and sixth rounds marked the continuation of the Tiger's Fabian tactics. In splendid condition, knowing he had the strength, wind and stamina to box all day, Donnelly circled around the veteran, still respectful of his punch, dancing in and out, keeping Sullivan in constant action, yet always avoiding a dangerous exchange of blows. For once the Tiger was thoroughly tamed, yet his superior strength gave him confidence in the clinches. Then he would rest his weight on Sullivan, wrestle with him, maul him about and with deadly monotony club that heavy, hairy forearm across the veteran's tender kidneys. Each minute found Sullivan growing weaker and now, deep in his heart, he knew he had no chance of victory.

His breathing was a painful wheeze and the flesh on the inner part of his thighs was quivering. He was close to collapse and he knew it. He realized that in justice to himself, to his wife and children, he should let his seconds throw in the sponge and save him from further useless punishment.

But the instinct of a wholly courageous man never listens to reason. Two hundred battles had hardened his natural indomitability and now a raging hatred flamed through every fibre. He must win! He must! He must! Either win or fall fighting, for he simply did not know how to quit.

Curiously enough, even at this moment, his mind was cold as ice. Less than half a minute remained of the intermission—he knew that round was his last—that already he had taxed his body almost to the limit of human endurance—yet he lay back with half closed eyes, swiftly considering each possibility, like some veteran commander, who, amid the wreck of his flying legions, takes stock of disaster, grimly determined to wrest victory from defeat.

"Brandy!" he suddenly gasped. "Quick! A drink of brandy."

An obedient second raised a bottle to his lips and he tilted his head and let half a pint gurgle down his throat. For a few seconds he gasped and choked, his heaving stomach threatened to regurgitate the liquor, then he felt the fiery fluid leaping through his veins and crouched on the edge of his stool.

The gong rang and Sullivan slowly walked across the ring as Donnelly came from his corner. For perhaps thirty seconds they sparred then the veteran dropped his right glove a trifle, and, as he grimly pressed forward, the Tiger lashed out with a snappy straight left. Sullivan staggered back a pace; then pressed forward again, his right still held low. Donnelly repeated with a jarring left hook.

Sullivan reeled, and the spectators, believing the veteran groggy, rose to their feet with a thundering shout. Again Donnelly glided in with a short, solid left to the jaw and Sullivan staggered back against the ropes.

His knees buckled, his guard dropped, his eyes seemed dim and glazing and his face was a tragic mask of pain. The shrill, savage roar of the crowd was like a gigantic siren.

"Go get him! Go get him!" Sullivan could hear ringleaders calling and he toppled sidewise, his open right glove dangling almost to the floor.

The Tiger scented his kill. With a high poised right he leaped forward for the finishing blow.

It never landed. Instead Sullivan's loosely dangling arm came whizzing upwards from the floor, rigid as a bar of steel. Shoulder and arm and chest muscles pulled it upwards and it was driven by back and loins and legs. Every atom of his strength and every pound of his weight was behind that iron-like fist as it shocked home squarely against Donnelly's uptilted jaw.

The sickening crack could be heard around the ringside. Donnelly collapsing in midair, crashed to the canvas like a pole-axed bull.

Sullivan stumbled over Donnelly's prostrate body and lurched into his own corner. The crowd, after one Gargantuan yelp of astonishment, stood stiff and silent, staring ringwards with widened eyes.

Slowly as a paralytic, the referee stalked to where Donnelly lay, and bending over him, began his slow count. Sullivan, half hanging against the ropes, watched him with a triumphant, sneering grin. He knew the force of that murderous uppercut. He knew that Donnelly—no, not the strongest man who ever lived—could recuperate from such a stunning blow in thrice ten seconds. His only concern was lest he slump to the floor himself before the referee concluded that dragging dilatory count. Despite the mechanical grin that twisted his bloody lips, every muscle of his body suddenly had gone dead and his head was spinning like a top. Only his will held him propped in the angle of the ropes. He heard the referee's deliberate chant as coming from a great distance.

"E-e-e-e-i-i-i-i-g-g-h-t" the referee droned and Donnelly still was on the floor.

"Ni-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-n-e" Skelly shrilled in a prolonged sing song chant and his reluctant right arm upraised as he began the final count. Now one could have heard a pin drop in that vast assemblage. Startled, silent, incredulous, twenty thousand persons stared at their supine favorite.

"T-e-e-e—" Skelly began to count, and then through the silence broke the staccato clang of the gong.

For all his weariness Sullivan straightened and lurched forward with a furious protest.

He *knew* the round had not ended—that three minutes had not elapsed since he last left his corner.

Donnelly's seconds already had rushed into the ring and were carrying the fallen fighter to his corner. As Sullivan lurched forward and seized the referee the roar of released excitement from the spectators drowned his words and the official angrily shook free. An instant later Sullivan's own seconds were pulling him back to his corner.

Sagging on his stool, faint, dizzy, he mumbled like a man in delirium, choking as an ammonia bottle was thrust under his nose. In the opposite corner Donnelly's seconds were frantically working to restore their man. Already the Tiger's eyes were blinking with a vacant stare and he was shaking his head like a dog emerging from the water.

"What happened—the time?" Sullivan gasped dully.

"Morgan ran around to where the timer was and kicked the bell," his chief second explained. "There was half a minute left in the round. Duffy's raising hell about it now. But Skelly won't do nothing about it," he added morosely. "The longer they argue the longer rest the Tiger'll get."

The time keeper, fat and florid faced, had risen from his seat, gesticulating wildly while Sullivan's second, Duffy, holding the referee's arm, was lodging an impassioned protest. But the noise from the crowd was so great that even those nearest the ringside could not grasp what the argument was about and few of the excited spectators had noticed that the round had been unduly short. Shaking loose from Duffy, the referee ordered him back to his corner, and still muttering, the time keeper sank back in his seat.

Donnelly was sitting erect now, but his eyes were still blinking in a dazed way as he listened to the advice of his seconds. His marvelous vitality already had thrown off the first effects of that numbing upper cut. His handlers were advising him to stay away until he fully recovered. Time was with the younger man. His shrewd seconds had observed Sullivan slumping on his stool and sensed the veteran was close to collapse.

He was. Despite the ministrations of his handlers, he still was slouched forward with hanging head. Age and the culminative effects of two hundred battles finally were claiming their toll. His vanished vitality could not be called back. Unlike the Tiger he had no untouched reserves of strength to tap. Whiskey and smelling salts failed to revive him. He was fully conscious but his lungs were gasping for air and the gloves, soggy with water, were like leaden weights on his inert arms.

"Should I throw in the sponge, Jerry?" Duffy demanded anxiously.

Sullivan weakly shook his head.

"Give me another drink," he gasped. If he must be beaten, he would at least go down fighting. Yet, even in this extremity a desperate hope sustained him. Donnelly was still dazed. He would stake everything on one final, furious punch. If only his legs would hold him up, carry him close to his nimble adversary. He gritted his teeth and summoned his last reserves—not of physical strength, that was expended, but from his indomitable will.

The gong clanged once more and Sullivan was boosted to his feet. As he raised his head he saw Donnelly warily siddling from his corner. Animated by a burst of rage, Sullivan dashed forward with surprising speed. Still unsteady on his legs, before he realized it, Donnelly was trapped against the ropes.

Sullivan's wild swing landed, but it was only a glancing blow and harmless. Then he felt his own head rocking under a fusilade of punches as Donnelly fought back like a cornered wild cat. The roaring in his ears had started again and now he knew it was the pack cry of the crowd.

"Down stairs—hit him in the pantry!" Morgan was screaming, his head thrust between the ropes. Donnelly obeyed, dropping his right hand and driving it against Sullivan's abdomen. Twice, thrice, four times he smashed home his savage uppercuts. Sullivan's bloody face contorted with agony and the veteran's blows seemed as futile as rain drops.

"Go get him! Go get him!" Morgan was urging and confidence lent fresh fury to the Tiger's assault.

Backwards along the ropes Sullivan lurched, bent over, eyes glazing, legs unsteady, while Donnelly flailed at his bent head with terrible hammer blows. Backward, ever backward, Sullivan faltered, keeping his feet only by some miracle of determination. Beaten back to his own corner, unable to retreat or sidestep, he suddenly collapsed on one knee. Now it was Donnelly, quivering with eagerness, who was restrained by the referee as the official decisively tolled off the seconds.

At the count of nine Sullivan was on his feet, but Donnelly leaped in and again his clubbing rights beat upon the veteran's drooping head with a deadly rhythm. Once more Sullivan dropped to one knee, perfectly conscious, listening to the count, trying to gather his waning strength for one more effort. Twice he tried to raise himself and twice his wobbling legs failed to support him.

Suddenly a towel came hurtling into the ring. An instant later Sullivan's seconds scrambled through the ropes and lifted him to his feet, just as the referee turned and hoisted Donnelly's gloved hand to signify his victory.

Sullivan made two flapping movements with his arms as he weakly tried to break away from his handlers; then suddenly went limp in a merciful faint.

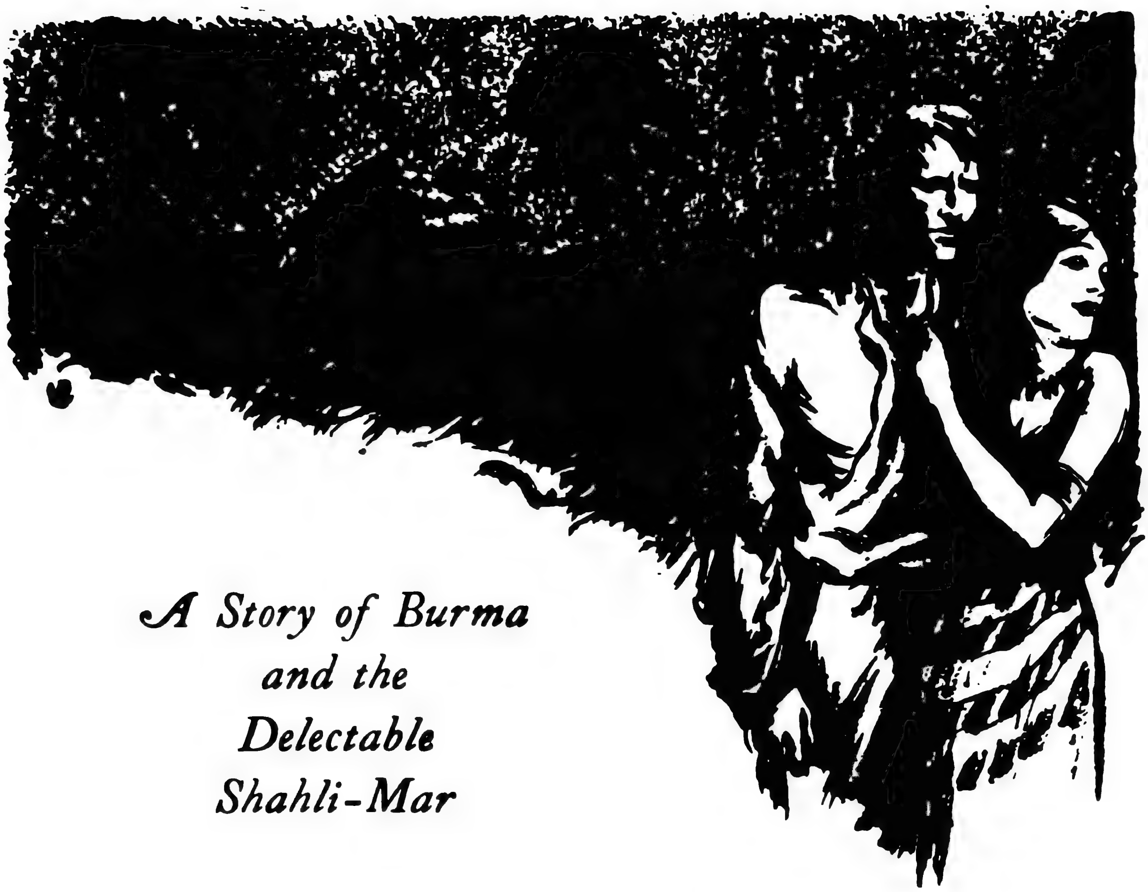
A great deep, many throated roar went up from the crowd. As the beaten fighter was carried to his corner he was roughly jostled by Donnelly's frenzied well-wishers who were stampeding into the ring.

The fight was over. Tiger Donnelly had won. Sullivan, the man who had fought a draw with the world's champion, had thrown up the sponge. In the torrid sunshine twenty thousand persons, still tense from the ebb and flow of excitement, shaking with the primitive passion which had gripped them during the desperate struggle, stood and cheered the black browed youth whose battered, bloody face leered a self-satisfied acknowledgment.

Apparently outclassed, beaten unconscious to the floor, he had wrested final victory from the very verge of defeat. Few of them suspected that one round had been shortened or realized that the referee's slow count had twice saved the Tiger.

They saw only a courageous youth rising triumphant from successive shocks to drive his flagging body to ultimate triumph. It gripped their imaginations. Their applause was a tribute to his spiritual indomitability. He was a symbol perhaps, a symbol of courage, strength, determination—the qualities they most admired.

The best man had won. And they still stood on chairs and cheered him as the sun sank behind the foothills and brimmed the bowl-like valley with a sudden gloom.



A Story of Burma and the Delectable Shahli-Mar

Preceding events briefly retold

Dan Starrett, a young American mining engineer, brings a gold dredge to Rangoon, Burma. From this point he must take it in barges up the Irawaddy River to the mine site. This must be accomplished while the river is still high, within a few weeks of his arrival.

During his first few days in Rangoon he goes to the Shwe Dagon Pagoda. Here, among the almost deserted shrines he comes upon a Burmese girl struggling to free herself from a too amorous Burman. Starrett goes to her aid and learns that she is Shahli-Mar, granddaughter of the headman in the village of Dhang, a few miles from where his dredge will operate.

Starrett is kept around Rangoon several weeks, waiting for Samford to supply the barges to take the dredge up-river. This constant delay weighs heavily upon Starrett because if he misses this high water of the Irawaddy the dredge can't be taken up until next year and the time clause of his contract will be vitiated.

Samford, the head of the mining corporation hiring Starrett, seems in no hurry about getting the work under way.

Starrett overhears a conversation between Samford and several others in which Samford makes it plain that he is doing his best to prevent Starrett from fulfilling his contract, and to prevent him from going up to the gold location for a preliminary investigation. This ends Starrett's inaction. He leaves before dawn the following morning for the gold location, traveling in a canoe with native paddlers.

Samford gets immediate word of his departure and hastens to his Shan wife. (Samford's marriage is not known in Rangoon. He keeps his wife hidden in the native quarter of the city and, unknown to her, is engaged to Vivian Mount, an English girl, whose father has invested heavily in Samford's mining company.)

Samford's wife is a native of the village of Kim-Popal, which is only several miles distant from the mine site. He tells her that she must use her influence in this village (her father is the headman) to see that Starrett does not return. She agrees to do this for Samford.

Starrett arrives at the gold site, looks about and pans out samples from a few pits to see how much gold the gravel will yield. To his amazement he finds it will not yield over one cent per cubic yard it takes at least eight cents to pay expenses of the dredge and Samford had told him it would run seventy-five cents per cubic yard. He then realizes the whole scheme is a gold-brick stock selling proposition and understands Samford's efforts to keep him from finding out the truth.

As he is finishing his survey a rain of arrows hits the clearing. One of his men is killed and he is struck in the shoulder. The others flee. The arrows are poisoned and Starrett is left for dead.

Toward sundown some Burmen from Dhang stumble upon him and carry him to their village. Here Shahli-Mar recognizes him and tells her grandfather, the headman, that this is the man who saved her in Rangoon. At the end of three days of careful nursing Starrett is himself again and departs for Rangoon. Shahli-Mar goes with him to visit some relatives there.

The following morning Starrett confronts a director's meeting of the mining corporation and reports what he has found. The directors ridicule his hasty analysis of the gravel, relying on Samford's

Concluding

Rajah TREASURE

By HUBBARD HUTCHINSON

reputation and experience. But in the face of this doubt Samford dares procrastinate no longer and at last has the barges ready to take the dredge up-river.

Shahli-Mar visits her cousins at their silk bazaar—here she sees a *sahiba* who looks so much like herself that she is filled with the Burmese fear of a *hundit* (double).

CHAPTER VIII

THE Burmese delight in visiting. Their lives are simple, their possessions relatively few; their gaiety unquenchable. It is nothing for a whole family to appear upon the doorway of a distant cousin in another village, unanounced, and stay for three months. To be sure, they usually provide their own food and bedding. But if they do not, it matters little. The possessive sense is singularly low among them.

So it was perfectly simple for Shahli-Mar to walk into the house of a woman of Dhang, living now in Rangoon and thriving mightily at the silk bazaar. She was welcomed, given a bed, invited to help sell silk at the bazaar, and free to come and go as she liked. No one dreamed of questioning her.

That night, therefore, she wandered out when it was fully dark, cheroot between her lips, her nails pinkened and her hair glossed and a brand new *kedsoe* of orange silk wrapped round her, and made her way to the cantonment. Pyang-Dhal had given her concise instructions.

"His room," he had told her, "opens upon a garden, at the rear, where the water tanks are. It is not the large garden, and no one goes there. His doors are at the corner, nearest the wall, which is low enough to climb at a jump." He had implored her to take him but she refused.

She reached the hotel, but found to her dismay that it was crowded with people; she stood in a clump of plumed grasses and watched them eddying to and fro in the big porch under the brilliant lights; *sahibs* in black and white, *sahibas* with bands of glittering stones in their hair, and dresses that clung to them. "They have no shame," thought Shahli-Mar, watching. "Such garments are like gossips; they reveal all under pretense of innocence."

Following the low wall, she made her way through the planting that screened it toward the back of the hotel. Music sounded, and she paused a moment to listen.

It annoyed her. "It goes lame," she thought, "like a maimed buffalo." (It was a waltz; the rhythm of three is not complete to the Oriental ear.) Yet, as she listened, the music, ebbing and rising, sent a sadness through her. She knew it was one of the *sahib's pwes*, those imcomprehensible and rather revolting parties where the men danced with the women, holding them in their arms. Suddenly the scene flashed before her imagination; she saw Dan, his arms round one of those glittering, half-clothed *sahibas*.

Alone in the darkness, she stamped her foot, and tears of loneliness, and of jealousy, filled her eyes. All in a moment, his remoteness, the strangeness of the world to which he belonged, her distance from that world, swept her.

Then, resolutely, she stopped crying. He needed her; he was in danger. So she went on, and reached the garden behind the hotel. Here was the place; the water-tanks loomed before her; that, then, was his window, nearest the corner. It was dimly lighted. The garden was deserted.

She crept forward, watching intently round her, and stood outside the window, looking in. Yes; this was his room. She saw his *topee*, with the dark scratch across the crown. The room was empty. From beyond it came the surge of the music and the hum of voices.

Quickly, with held breath, she stepped across the threshold, looked round. A table, chairs, the bed under its mosquito net; near her, beside the windows, a tall screen. Pipes, letters scattered upon the table; a coat flung across the back of a chair. She sniffed delightedly; a faint odor of tobacco and shaving soap hung on the air. This room held him, his impress was upon it.

With the subtle sense of people who live much outdoors, she realized he had lately left it.

"I will wait," she thought. "He will come back soon." She stood near the French windows to the garden, ready to slide out if anyone else came in the half open door, across the room.

She realized the music had stopped; then, suddenly, she heard his voice; but behind her, in the garden; then another's, a woman's in reply. They were coming nearer. They were making for that window. There was sudden anxiety in the man's tone. In panic she looked round, desperately. She was trapped. The door; she did not know where it led. In another moment they would be in the room. There was no escaping. And, as the voices came nearer still, she slipped behind the screen.

DAN went to the dance largely because he was ashamed not to. It would look, among those who knew, altogether too much as if he had crawled off with his tail between his legs. So he donned a dinner jacket, sauntered in rather late, and stood defiantly against the wall, smoking; a little taut, looking for slights.

But he had underestimated the Englishman's ability to divorce his business and social selves. Langhorn, bobbing by with the thin Edgecomb girl, grinned genially; old Wrecham nodded. The settled melancholy of Sir Edward's face lighted with a friendly word.

"That's where they have it on us," thought Dan, through his amazement. "Maybe it's breeding, and maybe it's sportmanship, but it's damned fine."

Then he saw Vivian across the floor, her dark, almost swarthy beauty enhanced by her white evening gown and the huge Canton shawl of flame and orange wrapped round her. She signalled with her eyes, and at the end of the dance he joined her.

"Let's go outside," she said at once. "I'm dying of the heat and racket. And I want to talk to you."

In the gardens she took one of his cigarettes, smiling her slow smile.

"Well, you seem to have done it," she remarked, lightly. "Father tells me you came back with an incredible tale of no gold and poisoned arrows." Then her tone shifted and she looked at him searchingly. "You really shouldn't have, you know. Curiosity killed a cat, Dan. You must have lost ten pounds. And your barges were ready the day after you left."

He stared. "That's news. How do you know?"

"Allan told me. He's terribly miffed about the whole thing."

"I'm sorry." His tone was short, and his lips tightened. He had no intention of being led into statements.

In silence, and with a growing constraint, they walked along the gardens toward the back of the hotel. Neither spoke.

Then suddenly her hand flew to her head, she swayed against him with a little cry. He caught her.

"Oh," her voice was faint, muffled, "I'm so dizzy—"

"Vivian—what—let me," he stooped to lift her. She shook her head.

"The heat—just a little faint—sit down—your room," she gestured weakly toward the lighted window. "No, I can walk."

Anxiously, he guided her, lifted her over the threshold, lowered her into his long rattan chair. Her head fell back, and her eyelids fluttered.

"Dan, a little brandy, please. I'm all right—just get me a little brandy—"

He dashed out of the room.

Instantly she was out of the chair, and half-way to the bookcases—toward the red Murray's guide of India on the shelves, had whipped out the plans and concealed them under her shawl. A step in the hall; she whirled, facing the tall screen by the window.

A sharp cry; the screen rocked, fell; there stood revealed a native girl, her face drawn, her body rigid with terror. And as Vivian looked, the terror leaped across to her too, and she felt herself turn weak with a horrid, unnatural fear.

For the face looking at her, dusky skin, fine arched brows, sleek black hair, was appallingly, terrifyingly her own.

For a stupefied, stark moment, they stared. Then, with a curious gurgling cry, the native girl, like a wild thing, sprang through the window and was gone.

If Dan had come back at that moment, she would probably have collapsed. But a hurrying Chinese boy with a tray of empty glasses had collided with him, upsetting his brandy, and he had raced, cursing, to the bar again. The interval gave her time to think. When he returned she was standing by the window, her face ghastly.

At his hurried words she sank into a chair, drawing her shawl round her, gulped the brandy, clutched at his hand.

"Dan," she managed, "I've had a beastly fright."

"Fright—I thought it was the heat."

"No—no, just now." She stopped, controlled her voice, went on. "I think I must have fainted a moment when you left. Then there was a noise," she pointed, "the screen fell over. Behind it was a girl."

"What?"

"A Burmese girl. I just caught a glimpse of her but—it—was terrifying. She looked so much like—me!"

"Shahli-Mar!" It shot across his mind, with an almost blinding revelation of the resemblance, the likeness, that had haunted him. Now that it was presented to him, he wondered how he could have failed to identify it. Vivian's lighter skin, her bobbed hair.

With a start he came back, bewildered, to meet Vivian's alert curious eyes.

"What was she doing?"

"I don't know. She was as frightened as I, I think. She ran out the window." Vivian's forehead wrinkled. "It was all so sudden—it seemed to me she had something in her hand—folded blue paper, it looked like—"

"Folded blue paper," he stared at her a moment, quite blankly. Then the words, the idea, went home, and with a bound he was across the room, had shot a hand behind the red book, then turned toward her.

"My blue-prints," he whispered. "Gone."

CHAPTER IX

HE PACED restlessly up and down the darkening platform of the Shwe Dagon Pagoda. At his left stretched the wide empty space of pavement that circled the giant spire; at his right, the wilderness of shrines which edge the platform. It was here or hereabouts, he could not remember the exact place, that he had encountered Shahli-Mar before.

The day had dragged by, after a night of endless cigarettes and conjecture, to the time she had set for their meeting. Long before dusk had settled he went to the pagoda, doffed his shoes, and climbed the long stairs under the teakwood gallery, too preoccupied to register its beauty, accepting absently the golden splendor of the pagoda as he reached the top.

"Dhan-star-et!" He whirled round, to see her standing beside a small *stupa*. She beckoned; he followed swiftly, in and out between shrines and *pythayats* till they reached a roofed and wall-less pavilion at the very edge of the pagoda's platform. Beyond the tops of the hillside trees below, the city lights pricked the dusky, brownish blue of falling dusk, the color of smoke. Plaster images of Buddha loomed ghastly through the dark.

She came to him quickly, took his hands; looked up at him earnestly, and he felt in surprise that she was trembling.

"Oh, Dhan-star-et," she said quickly. "I am afraid—I am, yes. I have pray all day at the shrine."

He bent down, looked at her searchingly, wishing for a better light.

"Why are you afraid?"

"Because, last night, I went to your room, by the garden behind where the water towers are. I wanted to see you, Dhan-star-et. So I wait. Then I hear you. I hide. You come in—she come in!" Her voice sank and she snapped her fingers. Dan waited.

"Then," the whisper went on, with obvious effort and chattering teeth, "then you go. She go across room, and take something from behind books. Then she turn round, and—"

"Wait a minute, Shahli-Mar." He interrupted gently, but his voice was firm. "You say she took something. What was it?"

"It was papers—blue papers. I do not know what. She hide them under her shawl. Then she turn around, and—"

"But Shahli-Mar, you must tell me carefully, you saw her take them?"

"Oh yes, yes. Do I not say?" She put it aside impatiently, and hurried on. "Then she turned around, and then I *see!*"

His bewilderment grew. "See what?"

"I see she is a devil—because, because she—she wears my face, Dhan-star-et."

At his sudden low laugh she started. "Nonsense, Shahli-Mar. It was a *sahiba* that looks like you. She does look like you, for a fact. Just chance, that's all." He became very grave. "Now listen. You tell me you saw the *sahiba* take blue papers, and hide them. Then what happened?"

"Why, then I was veree frightened, to see this devil with my face, and I ran away—quick—out of the room, home. All night I pray before the Bodhisat and do charms."

He hesitated, his doubt, his uncertainty growing. After all, what did he know, actually know, of her, of these strange people? And his mind, against his will, dove-tailed swiftly the facts at his command; her grandfather's dislike of whites, his curiously bitter resentment against the mine; Shahli-Mar's return to Rangoon with him and his own ingenuous explanations of the dredge, the plans. Abruptly he spoke.

"Do you know what those blue papers were?"

"I do not know," she paused, "but I think, the pictures of the boat-that-goes-on-land."

"You think right," grimly. "They are the pictures. I cannot build the boat without them. I *must* have them. And—" he spoke reluctantly, "the *sahiba*, whom I know well, told me that—that you took them Shahli-Mar."

At first she did not understand; then he heard her quick breath.

"I take the pictures—*I*—that is damn lie, Dhan-star-et. *She* take them. I see—I see her. She want you think I take them. *Hai*, the shameless daughter of devils, the offspring of darkness," Shahli-Mar flew into Burmese in her excitement, "she is indeed what I thought, an evil devil, who assumes my shape to my confusion, being enamored of Dhan-star-et; oh, mother of corruption."

The still watchfulness of the man's face caught her. Abruptly she stopped; looked up incredulously with a little shake of her head, at his face.

"Dhan-star-et," the words came in little rushes. "You not think I took the pictures—oh, no—you not think that?"

She stretched taut, to bring her eyes near his face. The deepening twilight showed her the reluctant doubt. She fell back as if struck. Then anger swept her like a clear flame and her voice rang.

"Oh—oh—you think I take your picture—I, Shahli-Mar. After what I do—make you well when you die—bring you down"—the English words choked her. "Oh, to believe the she-devil. Where was the voice of thy heart—did it not speak? Fool, *fool!* that I thought thee half a god, and loved thee as such."

Suddenly she checked herself, brought her quivering face near again.

"Listen, I find those picture. I, Shahli-Mar. I bring them back to you. *Then* you believe me."

A sudden sob choked the fury of her voice. She pressed her hands fiercely over her face, flung her head up, and before Dan, dumbfounded by the outburst, could speak, she had turned and run away into the darkness.

Too late, he sprang after her, remorse winging him. But she had vanished among the maze of shrines.

NEXT morning Samford sent for him early. He smiled coldly when Dan, haggard from a second broken night, appeared at the office.

"Your barges are at the warehouse docks, Starrett," he said shortly. "You can go down and superintend the loading this morning."

"I'll go down right away. How soon can we get off?"

"As soon as you're loaded. You will take a gang foreman and half a dozen men who can assemble machinery under direction, from here. I've arranged that. They'll go up on the barges with you. We'll try to see you're not—ah—disturbed by any further delays. I'll expect you to be operating in a week." He waited, and Dan, his nerves raw and sensitive, caught a carefully hidden expectancy in his manner. It snapped to decision the question that had tortured him all night.

"Vivian took them," he thought swiftly. "And has told him. So he's chasing me away as fast as he can. I was wrong about Shahli-Mar. God what a fool." Aloud he returned smoothly:

"Well, this is a bit sudden after a month of waiting, but it suits me. Now about getting the stuff inland—"

There was quick technical talk of transportation, "mules will go up with you, and buffaloes you can get from the village of Kim-Popal. Your foreman speaks some English; he'll act as interpreter—a rupee a day, and they'll keep themselves. Living quarters for the workmen in the warehouse."

It was clean and crisp, and they parted with quick nods, as if there were nothing but the best of understanding between them. But Dan felt Samford's eyes on his shoulder blades as he left and knew that knives were less deadly.

He fell upon the work with the joy of long idleness, of stretching muscles, mental and physical, with a zest that hustled the lackadaisical coolies in and out of the cavernous dark warehouse and upon the hulking barges. He sweated and swore and bossed, and felt himself coming to life by the minute.

At four he was finished; changed his reeking clothes and sought out the American consul in the coolness of the club, and spoke to him of certain matters. Whereon the consul, a youngish man with a weakness for jade, hustled efficiently in confutation of tourist belief.

From then until midnight he combed the native quarter for any sign of Shahli-Mar—a fruitless performance. Toward midnight he gave it up. He itched to confront Vivian with accusations, but forebore. That was finished; and so long as he was getting up the river. . . .

Next morning the fruit of the consular effort was visibly manifest in the presence of six Sikhs, tall, turbanded, bearded and jangling with weapons, looking like militant prophets, and captained by a giant who spoke adequate English.

"Just to avoid," further trouble Dan explained suavely to Samford and the others. They had gathered on the wharf to witness the departure. Vivian, Sir Edward, Langhorn, the consul and a few others. Under the blaze of the morning sunshine, and amid the babel of the laborers aboard, the rivermen swarming round the giant barges and the stout light-draft little vessel which towed them, Dan stepped aboard, grinning, gay. Samford was bland; Vivian's slow smile was enigmatic. Sir Edward called above the tumult:

"Mind how you pick up any more arrows," he said, but beneath it Dan sensed an anxiety and a real friendliness that touched him.

The whistle shrieked; the vessel pulled away; out into the stream with its bulky appendage. Dan watched the dock draw away. As the pier receded he had the joy of catching, on the faces of Samford and Vivian, a veiled but growing bewilderment.

Not until Rangoon lay far behind did he go to the tiny forward deck. There, under the little awning, he reached inside shirt and undershirt, brought out a cloth envelope marked with his name and the seal of the consulate, and in his own writing "Hold till called for."

From it he half drew out stiff folded blue papers; surveyed them fondly; lit his pipe, and then carefully thrust the envelope away.

It was the extra set of plans he had deposited with the consul on his arrival.

CHAPTER X

SHAHLI-MAR restlessly paced the courtyard behind her friend's house. Overhead the *parakeets* were returning with chattering to the dark foliage of the mangoes; the sun slanted gold level spokes over the wall as evening drew near.

The two days since Dan's departure which, concealed in a crowd on a neighboring pier, she had watched through tears of hurt pride and longing, she had prowled the city, up and down, her eyes alert for a glimpse of her "double." She had haunted the cantonments, the shops where the *sahibas* buy hats and magazines. A European, faced with such a search, and no means of employing outside aid, would have given up after the first morning. But time means nothing to an Oriental.

"If I do not find her," she spoke to Pyang-Dhal, who sat upon the cool stones and watched her with devoted uncomprehending eyes, "then truly she is an evil spirit and has vanished. But I think she is a *sahiba*."

"What is this thing she has taken, that thou seekest?"

"I do not altogether know, but I think it is a magic picture, a charm with which Dhan-star-et makes his boat-that-runs-on-land. And he has gone without it." She lit a huge white cheroot. "I must find it."

The boy stirred resentfully. "But why—why do you do this?"

She looked out across the tops of the trees, into the deepening blue of the sky, and replied softly:

"Because this *sahib* has doubted me, and I would convince him in my own fashion. Because I loved him, believing him to be half-god, according to my vision; and now, finding him foolish as are all *sahibs*, I still love him, and would find his magic picture. That is all."

Late that evening, as she was strolling with a chattering crowd of young folk at the heels of a marriage procession, she all but fell under the feet of the buxom girl behind her. Across the street, walking slowly toward them, she had seen Vivian and Samford, momentarily brilliant under a street lamp.

She pulled the long strip of silk on her shoulders up over her head to obscure her face, drifted out of the procession and interested herself in tying her sandal. Then, inconspicuous as a blown petal, she followed the two to the end of Dalhousie Street, around the little park there, and so to Sir Edward's bungalow, set back among dark trees and gardens. She waited till they had entered the house, then crept close. Burmese bungalows are open through and through. Two windows sprang into light; from behind a tall clump of shrubs she watched.

She could hear little; they spoke in low voices; but she could see plainly. The man seemed to be pleading, demanding; the girl, with smiling calm, refusing. Then the man took her suddenly, almost roughly, in his arms and held her for a long time and Shahli-Mar squirmed delightedly. A small canker of jealousy which had been gnawing at her since the episode in Dan's room suddenly died. She drew closer, stumbled over a root, and crouched, trembling in fear of discovery.

When she looked again, the girl was sitting in a chair, the man walking the floor before her. In answer to something he said, she stood up and a few sentences reached the listener.

"I will not give them to you, Allan. I got them for you; I intend to keep them, until. . . ."

The voice dropped again. The figures left the room; Shahli-Mar heard the door open and shut, and the man swung down the path and out upon the street. The girl returned, stood a moment in the center of the room, then suddenly crumpled into a chair and cried silently. Shahli-Mar's throat tightened as she watched.

"She loves him," she thought. "Here is no *hundit* (double). She is a woman like myself. *Hai!* It grows more difficult, this game."

She saw the girl rise and cross the room; it went suddenly dark. Another behind it, with doors open upon a shallow porch that led to the garden where she crouched, lighted up. Swiftly she glided from shrub to shrub, worming her way nearer until she gained a clear view. Then she gasped.

Under the light above the dressing table the girl was opening a box, and from it she took out stiff folded blue papers. Shahli-Mar recognized them at once. She laid them upon the table and switched off the lights. There remained a faint glimmer in the room that enabled Shahli-Mar to see her moving about, undressing; she even heard her footsteps. The rest of the house was in darkness, its cornices glistening under the rising moon that began to flood the garden.

She chewed her finger in an agony of doubt.

"What to do now? Did she put them back in the box? Then why take them out? No, she has put them with her, in the bed. I must wait."

Wait she did, a good half hour, while the climbing moon laid a stronger and stronger yellow light over the garden and the sleeping house, and Shahli-Mar's legs grew cramped with standing in the cool of the night air. Then, imperceptible as the moving moonlight itself, she began to creep toward the porch.

She gained it; a creaking board brought her heart pounding in her throat; nothing stirred. The doors to the room opened inward, and one was ajar; the one nearest the dressing table within.

She slipped inside and stood with held breath. The room smelt delicious; a gentle feminine odor of perfume. From the corner at her left, beside the other doors to the porch, came a gentle, regular breathing.

Inch by inch she made her way to the dressing table; she had kicked off her sandals, and her bare feet made no sound. She found the box; tried it gently; the lid lifted, it was empty. Her guess had been right.

Her eyes, accustoming themselves to the darkness, now took in the room clearly; the oblongs of moonlight fell upon the light matting of the floor, and across the middle of the bed. She could see the figure outlined under the white cover.

"It will be under her head," thought Shahli-Mar, and slunk like a shadow.

Her hand was out—her fingers had slid under the pillow—their tips had encountered the stiff edge of paper, when the sleeping girl sighed and turned. It brought her face full in the moonlight.

To Shahli-Mar, it was her own face looking up at her, and for one fear-stricken instant she lost control; the old superstitious terror flooded her; instinctive fright commanded, and she sprang back.

Something clattered; slid, banged appallingly. A scream, white and shrill and horrible from the bed; an answering yell from outside; Shahli-Mar, springing blindly for the door, ran full into the arms of a man-servant, who clutched her tightly, howling. Exclaiming voices; running bare feet—slamming doors; then the lights sprang up in the room.

For a split second there was tableau; the struggling girl at the door; back to the room; the man-servant, his arms round her; Vivian, one hand at the light switch and the other clutching her pajamas about her throat, and at the door to the interior of the house, glinting automatic leveled and white hair tufted, stood Sir Edward, shadowy servants behind him, his face gray with fear.

He crossed the room to Vivian in three strides.

"Vivian—are you all right?"

"Yes—it's a thief, I think." Her voice caught; she was white.

Then Shahli-Mar ceased struggling and with a gesture of despair, wrenched herself round and faced them.

"No, not a thief—*she* is—she took—"

But Sir Edward uttered a great cry, and staggered against the wall, his eye starting, as he stared at the defiant little figure.

Slowly, like a man in a nightmare, he crossed to her, Vivian behind him. His head turned crazily from one to the other, back to Shahli-Mar.

"Who—who are you?" His voice was a shaky whisper, his face ghastly.

Shahli-Mar sullenly bent her head. The man began to shake. He raised trembling hands. Vivian's attention switched sharply to him.

"Father, you are ill, what—"

He shook more and more violently—his teeth chattered so he could scarcely speak—pointed from Vivian to Shahli-Mar.

"Look! look! The same—don't you see, the *same*."

His voice rose to a thin shriek. Suddenly he had lifted Shahli-Mar's face, turned it, like a flash toward the light. His finger trembled over the small triangular scar beside her eye. He began to laugh, horribly. The man-servant backed away, in terror. Vivian shook him.

"Father," she cried, "father!"

The laughter stopped; he swayed toward Shahli-Mar. He raised his hand in a half formed gesture of caress, then clenched it a moment across his eyes, and looked at Vivian.

"She—is your sister," he uttered in a tired whisper, and slid fainting to the floor.

CHAPTER XI

TEN days after his departure from Rangoon, Dan sat at the door of his little house, smoking a pipe. His face was burned a deep copper-brown; his forearms and his knees were the color of saddle-leather, as he had adopted the "shorts" of the British tropics. A bandage circled one wrist, and two days' stubble roughened jaw and chin. He was dog-tired and absurdly happy.

His house, raised three feet above the ground and built of bamboo and thatch in the Burmese fashion, with a loose plank flooring, stood at the side of the clearing nearest the trail to Kim-Popal. His boy had just departed with the scant remnants of an enormous curry, picking his way across the clearing, past the fantastic skeleton of the Stuba Dredge No. 14, to the cheerful hubbub of the cook-fires and the men's camp.

He had worked to the point of dropping, for from the first, he had worked almost alone. The foreman Samford had sent soon proved his purpose, and at the end of two days, during which he had tangled the transportation of the heavy loads from Kim-Popal inland to the mine-site into a snarling, sweating, swearing mess of men and beasts, Dan had fired him. By instinct he had fired him in a fashion most calculated to strengthen his own position with the native workmen, for he had called them together at the end of the second day, and spoken through one of his Sikh guard. Dan would have been amused had he known the exact idiom of some of his translations.

"Understand ye all," the Sikh's deep voice rumbled out of his beard, "this man who is exalted above you has done foolishness which is a sore to my eyes; yea he has wilfully entangled the feet of stupidity with the ropes of treachery, and he will now be punished. And do ye all observe so that hereafter if ye be found doing that which impedes the work, so shall it befall you likewise."

Whereon Dan had soundly thrashed the foreman, a big half-breed Chan, and sent him back to Rangoon. (He went as far as Kim-Popal and there proceeded to nurse his grievance on *bhang* and talk for days against the *thakins* before proceeding to Rangoon with the news that the work was going forward. But Dan didn't know that.) The effect on the rest was wholesome. Whatever obstructionist policy had filtered down from the foreman, promptly vanished, and the end of four days found the material in the warehouse, ready for assembling.

He found the unskilled labor picked up on the place—men from Kim-Popal and Dhang who were persuaded from a habitual life of ease by the fantastic prices—intelligent and exact. The two villages loathed each other, and he had frequent fights on his hands, but this was to be expected. The men with mechanical experience, two Lascar engineers out of I. F. C. boats, half a dozen Asiatic breeds who had worked in factories and power houses of Rangoon, all with a good smattering of English, proved far better than their tatterdemalion aspect warranted, and, unlike the half-baked American mechanic, had no delusions of grandeur about their own knowledge.

So despite constant delays, a thousand daily exasperations—as when a coil of quarter inch cable, left beside its wrappings, entangled the feet of a strayed and burdened mule, who promptly took to the woods and knotted the cable among trees for two days' work, to say nothing of broken strands—the work went forward, and Dan, leaping from the channeling of the stream which was to form Stuba No. 14's pond, to bolting end-beams of the stacker, thinned a little and hardened, while his Sikh guards patrolled the woods with army rifles. Even round the cook-fires at night two were always on watch while the others, arms laid aside, ate and gambled.

He was too busy during the daylight and too muscle-and-mind weary at night to think much of the problems left in Rangoon; save that, as he considered Samford's discomfiture when that worthy should discover he had the plans, he grinned briefly. He had no doubt Samford would discover it; perhaps already someone had reported that the dredge was taking shape. So from the morning he drew them out, he never parted night or day with his blue-prints; instructed his Sikhs specifically about strangers, and continued to work.

One thing, however, no amount of work could drive from his mind; the image of Shahli-Mar, as she stood before him in the twilight of the Shwe Dagon, incredulous, hurt, furious. He wondered, troubledly, what she was doing; whether she really had attempted to recover the stolen plans. Certainly not, he assured himself; simply the gesture of an excited girl.

But the assurance did not convince him, and during the lonely evenings, and when his mind slid away into sleep, he found himself thinking of her with an increasing tenderness, and an actual longing. Correspondingly grew his belief in her, so that he was able presently to look back upon his doubt incredulously and to curse himself. If he could only have found her that night to tell her any quixotic search for the plans was unnecessary.

Perhaps old Keshoo had heard from her. He had been too busy and too weary to even negotiate the scant mile to the village of Dhang at the day's end. When he began operating he'd have it a little easier.

He stood up, stretched himself, and crossed the clearing to the men's camp, beside the warehouse. One of the workmen, from the village of Dhang, too, had been hurt, his hand cut badly as a piece of sheeting slipped. Dan found him, the bandage off, weakly rubbing dirt in the cut.

"Here!" Dan stooped beside him, shaking his head, laughing. "You mustn't do that. Burree," he called to his interpreter Sikh, "come here. This fellow's got to understand. And bring my medicine kit from my room."

The man howled under the iodine, but Dan was firm, and Burree expounded.

"The *sahib* says if you take the bandage off, a million devils will enter and devour your flesh, and your teeth will lock together and your eyes drop out," Burree embroidered a bit on Dan's symptoms, "and you will die like the mad dog, with froth and screamings."

"I did but rub in the roots of *khafru*, mixed with dung," the man whimpered. "So we have always done in our village."

"Yah!" Burree was lofty. "Thy village," he translated.

"This is a better way," returned Dan, through the Sikh. "Old ways are good, but do not scorn new baskets." He felt no fever at the man's forehead; his pulse was slow, he had lost much blood, and Dan, slipping an arm under the brown head, gave him a nip of whisky.

"Now keep quiet," he ordered. "No more work till you are well. We'll look after you." Which came out, translated. "Rest, and do not irk the *sahib* with flux of talk, nor tearing away the cloth. And you will recover, and have naught to do but lie quietly, for the *sahib's* hand is upon you like a father and in his goodness he saith you shall not toil till the wound is healed."

"The *sahib* is like a Burman, his heart is kind," came a deep voice behind them and Dan, still squatting, turned to see Keshoo looking down upon him, his venerable wrinkled face relaxed in a smile. Dan led the way to his shack of a house, ordered tea, and with the aid of Burree, whose eyes had opened wide enough at his *sahib* entertaining an old Burman whom he evidently knew, proceeded to polite converse. With hesitation Dan mentioned Shahli-Mar.

"Thy grand-daughter is still in Rangoon?"

"I suppose." The old man waved a cheroot. "She goes as she wills. When the spirit moves, she returns. Doubtless the *sahib*, when returned to his own people, no longer saw her?" He could not keep the bitterness out of his face.

Dan reddened. "My life is in her hand," he returned, quietly, "but my work is commanded by others. I was concerned with this, from the moment of my return," nodding at the scattered machinery. No need to mention the matter of the plans. The old man would not understand.

Keshoo looked disdainfully over the clearing, now darkening with twilight.

"All this is without profit," he said calmly. "Here is not gold enough to make one ring for Shahli-Mar's small finger. They are fools who plan thus."

"On that, there may be two minds." Dan had no notion of admitting his own exact agreement, especially through his Sikh interpreter. "I but do my bidding. It is my task to work the ground, not inquire into the business of those who send me." Keshoo snorted, sat for a time smoking silently, then departed in dignity for his village.

IN THE days that followed, he took to coming over, more and more often, watching the operations of assembling, sitting under the shade of trees, or more often in the door of the shack. Dan, looking up as he hurried from warehouse to pit, urging, commanding, taking a hand where needed, would find the old man's eyes following him constantly, with a curious mixture of disapproval and undeniable fondness, such as one gives a naughty child. It puzzled Dan, but he was too busy for analysis. They talked during the evenings. Sometimes he discoursed solemnly of Buddhism, the Middle Way and the Wheel of Being; of the inscrutable pattern of existence. But more often he reiterated, over and over, the futility of mining in that place.

"No one knows this country as I do," he

declared once. "Have I not ranged from the Irawaddy to the Great Mountains, following ancient ways and forgotten passes? Is it for nothing that my father's fathers were counted kings hereabouts? Ye are like children, ye *sahibs*—all noise and haste." And he would smile slowly at Dan, to rob his words of sting, while the scandalized Burree translated deprecatingly.

One evening Dan met him at the wood's edge; greeted him in halting and grinning Burmese, looked round for Burree. Keshoo lifted a thin old hand, looked at Dan steadily.

"No," he said in a clipped, curious accent. "I—speak English." Dan almost fell at his feet. Keshoo continued calmly.

"Yes, long time I do not talk it. Young man at school, I learn it well. And I read always. But the tongue is slow."

"But why," Dan found his own sufficiently inadequate, "why don't you—why have you pretended like this?"

The old man's look pierced to his shoulder blades.

"I have hated the *sahibs*," he said as if to himself. "For fifty years. There was reason. As young man I worked for the government, yes, the ge-o-logic survey. Then one spoke falsely against me, and I was prisoned. So I hated them. All, even innocent ones. But that is long time gone. And now," he brought his smouldering eyes back and looked at Dan, "I am an old man, lonely. You saved my child—the moon upon the ebbing waters of my life," he lapsed a moment into the vernacular, "and my soul drew to you as you lay sick because of that . . ." He broke off, his eyes again remote, and Dan waited, wondering.

Abruptly Keshoo continued, "*sahib* or no, you saved her, and I think you are a good man, and she—" he looked so searchingly at Dan, and with such deep intent, that he felt himself redden again. Keshoo finished the scrutiny with a sigh, shrugged, quite evidently, some weighty thing away, and smiled.

"Now that we talk without another," he said. They had walked apart a little into the shadow of the woods. "Tell me, my son—you think gold is here?"

Dan shook his head. "What I think doesn't matter. This is my job."

"That is right. You should not say. But I know. When you sick, with poison, you talk." His face wrinkled with shrewdness. "But I, too, do not say all I know. The gold is not—here." And with a sudden little chuckle, he went off toward the village with the long easy stride of the countryman, leaving Dan bubbling with excitement. He returned slowly to his own shack.

"Tomorrow night," he decided, "I'll go over and find out what under the sun the old man knows. My God, what a people; what a country!"

But the next evening he was far too occupied to go anywhere.

CHAPTER XII

"I COULD not tell you last night," began Sir Edward. "I was too shocked, too shaken, and it is a long story."

Sir Edward's swoon had lasted alarmingly, and he had only recovered gradually. A doctor had come and gone, with a startled look at the two girls, one each side the bed. He had administered an opiate. And with hardly a word, with indescribable emotions, they had sat waiting for him to awaken. Now, all of them haggard, they sat in his study. There was a curious awkwardness upon them, a restraint.

He told the story, the two girls, so uncannily alike, growing stiller and stiller as his voice went on and the sunshine crept across the floor; and outside the door, the servants listened and whispered.

It began twenty years back, when as a young man with his dark Welsh bride he had been sent to a remote station up the Irawaddy, beyond the village of Dhang in the mountains, where a handful of men guarded a pass. Here the children had been born, twin girls, leaving their mother weak and feverish. When they were hardly a month old, one of them fell, cutting her eye and leaving a bad scar at its corner. The nurse, a Burmese woman, was discharged. Then one night one of the babies disappeared. The nurse sent for, had vanished. It was found that she was a daughter of an educated Burman, who, unjustly jailed, had banished himself to the country to nurse his hatred of the English.

The shock killed the young wife, already weakened by fever, and when at the end of weeks of search and the uproar produced thereby, a baby's unrecognizable body bearing a tiny gold necklet was found in a well, Sir Edward had given up, and taken his remaining daughter to Mandalay and thence to Rangoon. Hating the country, he had nevertheless stayed on, held by the thought of his dead wife in the lonely little hill cemetery, then by the faint absurd hope that the child still lived, then, as this died, by the responsibilities of his rising position.

He ended a little abruptly, staring from one motionless, intent figure to the other. Seen thus, despite their startling likeness, there were differences. Shahli-Mar was slightly taller, more lithe, her face, burned by years of exposure, many shades darker. But she had what Vivian lacked, her mother's corner-lifted, deeper eyes.

Abruptly he crossed the room to her, took her hand, then winced as she visibly shrank away. "After all," he thought, "I am an utter stranger." Gently he released the hand.

"My child," he spoke in Burmese, "thou hast nothing to fear. I have told, for the first time in many years. Thy sister never knew all. Thou—I am indeed thy father. Dost doubt? It needs but to look at thy sister." Then, as Shahli-Mar, dumb with the magnitude of the sensations within her, continued to twist her silk *kedsoe* in silence, he pulled up a chair beside her.

"Tell me, how came you to our house? Surely it was directed of the gods."

Shahli-Mar raised her eyes, across the room. Vivian's met them for an instant of intense contact. Her head shook the fraction of an inch.

"Oh," said Shahli-Mar, "I had come but recently on a pilgrimage, from—from afar. And I saw her," she nodded at Vivian. "And because she so resembled me I feared she might be a double and so I followed her and sought a hair from her head—to make her powerless against me. And she awoke, for I—I was afeared."

Thus Shahli-Mar, her first real address to her father being an elaborate lie. Yet it was inevitable. The intrigue which prompted it, that unsolved mystery, was real, as she herself, Shahli-Mar, half-caste granddaughter of Keshoo, was real. All this astounding revelation, this tall dark man, a great *sahib*, her father; herself his daughter, was unreal. It might be true. Doubtless it was true. But it lay outside her. It was remote, thin; it did not attach to her as a reality. It circled round her, dizzingly, she felt increasingly the sense of nightmare, and pressed her hands to her head.

Sir Edward watched her anxiously, a little awkwardly, signed to Vivian, stood up.

"I will leave you with your sister for a time. You—er—we must get you some clothes, you know; till then, you can use Vivian's."

Instantly before Shahli-Mar's eyes slid the picture of the dance at the hotel, herself watching from the garden, the *sahibas*, slim and dazzling, in thin clothing that clung to their bodies, beautiful clothing, soft, intricate. She was to have clothing like that.

Suddenly, through that one absurd trivial channel, poured in over-whelmingly the whole realization. It gave her imagination something it could grasp. Clothes, like a *sahiba*, like those dazzling remote figures of the dance.

She sprang up so suddenly that they started, her eyes widening. "Now I feel it, it is true, it is true! I am truly a *sahiba!*" She turned, suddenly sparkling, shining, to Sir Edward. "And will all know that I am indeed one of them—that I am thy daughter—that I am not *stengha* (half-caste), but *sahiba?*"

It dissolved that strange awkwardness, that stiff restraint that bound them. Instantly they were beside, their arms round her, laughing, crying. Vivian found herself saying half hysterically: "Of course, everyone, everyone at Rangoon—parties for you—lovely clothes."

Great emotion seeks the first channel to break its tension and not infrequently the ludicrous. At the end of five indescribable minutes, Shahli-Mar was sobbing with delight in her father's arms.

THE days that followed were very strange. The incredible news created a profound and instant sensation. Friends flocked to the house; Shahli-Mar in an agony of shyness fled to the kitchens or the garden. Sir Edward wisely announced she was ill, and could see no one for a time.

Her first instinct, when the realization of what the discovery of her father meant had sunk home, had been to rush straight off to Dhang, to her grandfather, and to Dan. But two things prevented. Her pride, and a feeling that she must somehow, herself, lay the ghost of his doubt of her. That, and a naive, childlike delight in all the bewildering fascinating life of a *sahiba* that began opening round her.

So she contented herself with sending for

Pyang-Dhal, receiving him in one of Vivian's tea-gowns, and enjoying hugely his utter amazement. The interview left her, however, with a twinge of dismay, a dawning realization, for he treated her as a *sahiba.*

"Nay," she had said, a little sharply, when Vivian tactfully left them alone together. "Look not so abashed. I am—have I changed with my garments? I can put on my *kedsoe* again, and smoke cheroots with thee beside the Tankh of the temple."

The boy was more penetrating. "It is not so, Shahli-Mar," he spoke simply, his voice harsh with pain. "Great fortune has come to thee, truly, but what hast thou, the daughter of a great *sahib*, to do with me? That," he tightened one thin hand, "is finished. And yet, if thou need me I bide in the same place—*sahiba,*" he choked, salaamed, and hurried out. Vivian found her in tears.

Upon Vivian, fell the major burden of instruction. It was unending. Shahli-Mar, of course, had the most primitive ideas of knives and forks. She preferred the floor to chairs. She bathed four times a day, and was secretly a little shocked that Vivian did not do likewise. On the other hand, she scrubbed her teeth with lime-twigs, and found toothpaste loathsome.

But in clothes, there was no difficulty. Shahli-Mar frankly gloated over silk slips and lace inserts, sheer stockings and high-heeled shoes, though these gave her difficulty, and she refused even her sister's denatured corsets with horror. Vivian enjoyed it hugely; it was a game of "dressing up," of playing dolls with the unique pleasure, highly flattering to the ego, of having a lovely image of one's self to adorn.

"I'm absolutely becoming a Narcissiac," she told Sir Edward one afternoon. "She does lend herself so to decoration. I wish I were a few shades darker."'

And through it all the two girls were silently, subtly sounding each other out; putting forth sensitive feelers of psychic questioning, warily circling each other. In this Vivian had a great advantage, being on familiar ground. She was untiringly kind, doing all she could to win the other's confidence. Nor was this effort entirely disinterested. She feared Shahli-Mar's knowledge. The encounter in Dan's room, the real cause of Shahli-Mar's entering her room: this lay, untouched, between them. They caught it, now and then, in each other's eyes, creating a slight interval, always of self-consciousness. As they became more at ease, as Vivian's quiet authority grew, it came closer and closer to the surface, until one night, as they sat smoking in Vivian's room, she spoke gently, carefully.

"Shahli-Mar, I want to tell you why I I took those papers from Mr. Starrett's room that night. The reason you came here was to get them back, wasn't it?"

Shahli-Mar, startled, took refuge in Burmese. "Of what does thou speak?"

Vivian crossed to where she sat, took her hand, and looked at her earnestly. "Sister," it was the first time she had used the term in the vernacular, which gave it a tenderer shade, "of what use to pretend between us? I think we must help each other. Now listen, and I will say what I know. The *Sahib* Starrett works for *Sahib* Samford, on a mine to take gold from the earth. It is a great plan, and our father has given almost all his money to it, to *Sahib* Samford, to help him with the work. If it succeeds, it will return to us tenfold. It is clear?" The other nodded.

"Good. Now, it does not please *Sahib* Samford that they begin to dig at once in the ground. But *Sahib* Starrett, who is wilful," Shahli-Mar's eyes flashed, but she said nothing, "insists in order that he may finish his work and return home. And he may not be ordered to hold his hand—there is no word of this in his bond with *Sahib* Samford. Now mark. Without the picture-papers, he cannot make the machine that digs. So I, because I had seen where they were kept, took those papers for *Sahib* Samford. In due time they will be returned."

"Ah." Shahli-Mar smoked a moment, thinking. "But if it is Dhan—if it is *Sahib* Starrett's concern to make the machine that digs, and at once, what of him if he be prevented thus?"

Vivian looked at her impassive face intently. "That I do not know. It is no concern of ours. For us it is best he be prevented for the present."

To this Shahli-Mar made no response, and Vivian, not desiring to press too hard, deftly guided the talk away to more superficial things. That night Shahli-Mar lay in bed thinking a long time.

"*Hai, hai,* here is a sad state. If I steal the picture-papers and take them to *Sahib* Starrett, it seems that it will work ill against my father and sister, and against this *sahib* my sister surely loves. If I do not, it may work ill to him? What shall I do?"

Oriental-like, she fell back on time and fate, which would give her a sign, and did nothing.

SAMFORD appeared next night for dinner, and she disliked him instantly. He had not been to the house since Shahli-Mar's coming. He had been far too busy with his own affairs, which were going badly. A certain gentleman had appeared, had a confidential talk, and gone away, across the bay of Bengal to Calcutta—with the unpleasing news of curious rumors afloat regarding the Burmese Mining Co.—a passing breath, but leaving its tarnishing film in a marked decrease in stock sales. Samford had cursed. He needed a good two weeks yet in which to finish mobilizing, in those imperceptible ways best known to him, his resources. Then the world was wide, high and handsome. And he was only, after all, forty-five.

His pleasure in the outlook was not increased when one night, nearly three weeks after he had dispatched Dan to the mine-site, the discharged foreman appeared in his garden at twilight with the report of what had happened, embroidered at will, and the further news that the work was going forward.

"But it is so, *sahib*," the man insisted to Samford's quick, sure denial. "The workmen of Kim-Popal told me, and I crept through the forest and saw with these eyes. The *Red Sahib* jumps hither and yon like one mad, being everywhere, and the men do his bidding, and the machine grows."

"But I tell thee fool, that this cannot be. He has no plans."

The man stared. "But *sahib*, yes! Picture-patterns, such as the *sahib*—as all enjjin-eers have. I have seen them."

Samford's head buzzed, as projects, arrangements, judgments, fell clattering round his ears. The gaiety with which Dan had departed suddenly was clear to him. He had not reckoned with an extra set of prints.

What was not clear, was how he should proceed. If Starrett started operations, if he returned to Rangoon with even two days productive evidence, the game was up, finished. And yet—Samford clenched his fist and took an abrupt turn, while the foreman watched him wonderingly—he knew that his own hands were tied, that he would not be able to gather his resources and fly before a good three weeks.

He whirled on the waiting foreman.

"How much of the machine is finished, how does it look?"

"*Sahib*, I have never seen such a machine, but it is thus and so." He described what Samford knew was the assembled hull, power units, and traveling belt of buckets.

"Which means," thought Samford, "that he'll be ready to operate in about another week. Which is just two weeks too soon for me."

He beckoned the foreman. "Thou art a man of Kim-Popal. Come here tomorrow night at this time. It may be I shall have work for thee." The man salaamed and slid into the shadows.

He might have suspected the American had an extra set of prints. Even so, what could he have done more than he had? And, as he turned the situation over swiftly, as it became evident that the younger man's shrewdness in this one matter had resulted in a coup d'etat for him, Samford's increasing agitation, his first sense of tremor, of possible tottering, in the fabric he had built up, transferred itself to the man who had interfered with him in a blind, furious, growing hatred. Until now, Starrett had been an element in the game, a force to be overcome; hence, even contributory to the danger-sauced zest of the game itself. Now in his suddenly malignant importance, he assumed the potency of a symbol, of the only fate which Samford recognized. Nonchalant, careless, sure, grinning, he represented Youth, and Samford hated him as one can hate only an idea.

Like one driven he whirled out of his garden, and across the cantonment toward the native village, toward the house of his wife, his face congested in the darkness, his jaws tight.

"Never, never," his mind reiterated. "He shall never do it, never win." He hurried faster and faster through the languid indifferent night.

Next day the man from Kim-Popal was hurrying up river, with a message to the chief from her daughter that was written on silk and folded in an *amulet* round his neck, and verbal instructions of secrecy, laid on with curses if so much as a hint escaped him.

CHAPTER XIII

SHAHLI-MAR sat alone at the table, finishing coffee, and preparing with joy one of the rank white cheroots such as she had not smoked since becoming a *sahiba*. Vivian and her father had gone to a dinner from which she had begged off; it was still somewhat of an effort for her (and, though he would not have admitted it, to Sir Edward as well) to dine out. So she sat alone. How she had loved it; presiding at the white cloth, the glitter of the silver, and the cut glass, dressed in a new evening gown (they were going later in the evening to her first dance, with Samford) while the servants passed to and fro. It was deliciously like the most enchanting make-believe with the added advantage of being true.

Only once did she break the pose. The door through the serving pantry being open a moment, came loudly from the kitchen a section of indignant voice.

"Thy father was a buffalo; thy mother is without a nose, and thy aunts as well; thy brother—" it was pungent, broad vernacular, reeking of the bazaars. Even Vivian would not have understood it all. Shahli-Mar called swiftly.

"Thy tongue hangs out wantonly. Mind a *lao-bang* (butcher) does not cut it off." The scandalized servants flew out tittering, and Shahli-Mar finished her cheroot in a great silence.

Slowly, as she walked about the room, the zest went out of her and an indefinable melancholy took its place.

She felt a sudden longing for her "grandfather." She had written him a letter (dictated in part by Sir Edward) and had the day before received a reply.

> Fate hath willed that this come to pass, my child. The Wheel of Being turneth justly, varying not a hair. This is the sin of pride in me, that I hated all *Englishi* and made thee my means, the chance occurring, to bring long pain to one who had harmed me not at all. So that in my old age I am left alone.
>
> When thy father permits, come again to me for there is that which I would tell to thee alone.
>
> The *Sahib* Starrett works foolishly at his machine, without profit as I know. But he is kind and I am lonely. It may be that I shall open my heart to him a little. But I shall keep thy secret.

The letter had astonished Sir Edward, and somewhat puzzled her. As she recalled it, the vague sadness increased in her.

She shook herself impatiently. Truly, these people were kind, and she began to love her father. Vivian she frankly could not wholly trust, despite her generosity, which was endless. The day before she had given her a curious ring she had admired. "Just to wear in the house," she had added, laughing. "It is a gift from *Sahib* Samford, and one may not give away gifts." It was on her finger now.

And yet, she felt the ache of loneliness. It thickened round her like a fog, so that she walked restlessly about, smoking. In Vivian's room she paused before that locked box in which she was certain lay the picture-papers. She tried the lid gently. It rattled up; did not quite open, she sauntered on to her own room.

Here, laid upon the bed by the laundryman, her Burmese garments met her eye. The full *sarong*-like skirt, the *kedsoe*, the little silk jacket. She stopped dead before them.

Overwhelming nostalgia rushed upon her. From the little pile of clothes streamed an arc of impressions, memories, associations, the cool scent of early morning in the forest; the thin shadows, so blue and gossamer, drifting down between the trees at twilight, while the cattle came grunting home and gates creaked shut and from the monastery sounded the soft gong-clanging *piyashikoh;* the gay pwes, at one house or another, the dancing and the hot tea and the friendly laughing young people. The easy, wandering up and down the country.

"Oh, *hai, hai,*" she whispered, looking at the clothes.

Then she closed the door, and began snatching off her dress.

Ten minutes later—for it takes time to pile the hair in a side-knot, all smooth and gleaming—a Burmese half-caste girl stepped out upon the porch and slipped unseen down the garden. She heard the clock strike the half hour, seven-thirty. There was much time before the others returned.

Oh, the cool and delicious night, the plop plop of the dust cool and soft, spudging up between her toes, over the sandals. The air lay close to her body; the shadows and the scents belonged to her, attached to her again; her personality was not bounded by her skin, but extended out into the whole live, lovely world, as the threads in a rug extend beyond the color of one pattern.

She made straight for the main bazaar, and bought sweets in folded leaves, stuffed her mouth with betel, and plunged headlong into the good-natured chattering, her *kedsoe* pulled a little forward over her face. She sauntered, absurdly happy, up and down. She suddenly wanted Dhan-star-et, immediately and immensely.

Instead she saw Pyang-Dhal, alone, buying cheeroots from a round Chinese girl who ogled him. As he walked off Shahli-Mar followed, spoke. He nearly dropped in the road.

"I have run away, but it is only for to-night; I will go back presently. Tell me the news."

They strolled, talking at top speed and laughing much, through one after another of the streets, drifting toward the river where the long canoes are and the rivermen, when not carrying, or fishing, gamble and smoke. There came presently through the reveling night noises, the rat-tat of leather heels on the packed earth; a man walking swiftly. He passed two feet from them, hat down, a light dust coat over his dinner clothes. A greenish street lamp flickered over him, and Shahli-Mar's fingers dug into the boy's arm.

"*Hai!* It is *Sahib* Samford," she looked after him in complete astonishment. He was to come for them at ten; *sahibs* in dinner jackets do not hasten about the native city at night. Shahli-Mar listened an instant to the retreating footsteps, then sprang noiselessly after.

"I do not know. Some deviltry," she threw at Pyang-Dhal, who gasped a question. "At any rate, it is fun. Let us sneak."

Sneak they did, so that when Samford turned in at his wife's house, they were presently settled among plumed grass beside the dimly lighted window, holding their breath and blessing the absence of dogs. At the very first words she caught—they could not see—Shahli-Mar almost yelled aloud, and her heart thumped so she feared it could be heard. It was the woman speaking, evidently in reply.

"True, my husband, there was failure before—but—"

"And it cost me much, and is like to cost me more. He should never have come back alive." Samford, his voice bitter and quick, as Shahli-Mar had never heard it. "Now tell me, what said thy people at Kim-Popal? I had just now thy message to come. If this fail, the carcass is in the coal."

"It will not fail." The woman's voice sounded hurried and pleading. "Listen, and I will tell all. All of Kim-Popal will take part. Since two days they have been gathering weapons, fire-arms they have not, but spears." Her voice sank, and though Shahli-Mar pressed her ear to the wall itself, she could only catch a phrase now and then. "Sikhs, having eaten, gamble, unarmed, before the cook-place . . . in the woods, and they will rush. . . ." It was a long speech. In the middle Samford's voice shot a staccato low question; at the end another, the tone altering to one of satisfaction.

Then the woman's voice again; no longer reporting, but warm and eager. Samford replied sharply, his impatience driving the words in range of the listeners.

"Thou speakest folly. Love thee, of course I love thee, Have I not married thee. Enough," a brief interval of silence, "I must go. Remember, word to me, the first moment thou hearest."

They shrank down as he crossed the room, and hurried out to the street and away.

FOR a moment Shahli-Mar stood motionless, while her thoughts rushed like an erratic wind. *Sahib* Samford *married*, and yet Vivian—but under this lay a cold fear.

Pyang-Dhal nudged her. "Let us be gone. Here is no place to consider."

It galvanized her to decision. She caught his arm.

"Listen. I must question this woman. I do not know enough. Wait thou here, outside the door; if I need thee, I call."

She slid round to the front door, and without knocking, flung it open silently and went in.

The woman was seated in the pea-cock back chair, as Samford had left her. An instant she looked, inert, incredulous, at the tense little figure in the door, then she sprang up with a cry.

Shahli-Mar took in the room quickly; realized she stood in the only door; drew a deep breath.

"I have heard. I have have stood outside and listened. It is necessary that I know all."

The woman's soot-black eyes had narrowed to two long tiny slits; her level brows drawn in single line of anger and fear above them. Where a European woman would have screamed hysterically or flamed with wrath, she only swayed a little, like a coiled snake, and looked quickly round the room, then at Shahli-Mar.

"*Bhasti*, listener, sneak, who art thou? Go out. Go out quickly, before I call my servants, who will take thee to the *kathi* (police)."

"To whom I would tell of the arming of Kim-Popal, and other things," quoth Shahli-Mar, tense, a little crouched, by the door. She saw the other's eyes waver a fraction, and instantly pushed her advance. "Nay; I know too much. And I must know more. I must know all. Else I tell what I know already in certain places, and . . ." she shrugged.

"What is this to thee?" The woman was shaking with rage and fear.

"Enough. It touches me. Come, woman. Already I could blast thee. But I would know all. Then, perhaps nothing will be said that would endanger thee, or thy *husband*."

The shot added fuel to the other's mounting rage. She stamped.

"Yah, thou water-rat, thou daughter of a sweeper and a bazaar woman. Out, away! Tell thy tale—who will believe? My *husband*, forsooth!" She laughed.

"And yet," Shahli-Mar swiftly took another tack, and proceeded in a thoughtful voice; "and yet I think I would be believed, if I spoke to the *sahiba*—to whose arms thy husband goes even now."

The other sprang a step forward. "Thou liest, scum." She shot out, then bit her lips. But it was too late. Shahli-Mar pounced.

"Ha! That hits thee. Coulds't thou but see him, nightly, amorous, beloved. Fool, what dost thou know of his doings?" She was guessing mightily. "Thou—whom he hides. But I know, who move among the *sahibs*. I tell thee, he dotes on her."

She drove on, not daring to stop, taunting. "He deceives thee. I swear it. And for him thou makest a plan;" she hesitated an instant, "of destruction. This is madness. Tell me it."

But the first shock of Shahli-Mar's attack was passing. The woman faced her coldly. "I tell thee nothing. Thou art a liar. Go out. Go now—before I—"

"Oh, blind. He mocks thee. And I can give proof."

"Go out, or I—"

Shahli-Mar flung out her hand. "Nay. If I have to—" but she stopped. The woman's look had riveted upon her finger, where, with the gesture, flashed the ring Vivian had loaned her. Shahli-Mar could have shouted for joy. She had quite forgotten it.

The woman's face worked; she pointed. "*That!*" she uttered. "Whence—"

"Ah. Now thou wilt believe, perhaps. He gave it to the *sahiba* of whom I spoke. I borrowed it, for proof." She held her hand nearer.

The woman looked, and seemed to draw together, to crumple slowly. Then she raised her face, strained and seared with fury. She cursed Samford through all the hierarchy, invoking devils till Shahli-Mar herself shivered. She waited till the fury spent itself a little, then spoke, softly, gently, holding out, with keen intuition, the decoy of sympathy.

"Nay, sister, if thou hate him what avail curses? Tell me the plan, and he shall be confounded with no harm to thee."

Like a fish to bait she leaped at it, pouring all her jealousy, all the hurt that twisted her face, into it.

"Then, listen. He would destroy a *sahib* who builds a machine."

"That I know. Speak."

"Mark. Kim-Popal arms with spears and *dahs*. Preparing since two days. At the day's end, the *sahib's* habit is to sit alone in his house. He reads. Or talks with old Keshoo, headman of Dhang. At this time the Sikhs, having eaten, gamble before the cookhouse. Their guns laid in a pile. Workmen of Kim-Popal with knives, fall upon them. A signal. The others, hidden at the forest's edge, surround the *sahib's* house. It is soon finished. This was the plan, and—"

Suddenly she stopped, dismay swept her face, "Oh, Maitraya!"

Shahli-Mar caught the panic. "What—speak!"

The woman clasped hands, rocked. "Too late. Oh, woe—"

Shahli-Mar struck the woman's clasped hands.

"When?"

"Tomorrow night, after dark."

Hardly a day. Less than twenty-four hours. For a moment she stood still, while her thoughts whirled. Then she ran for the door. The woman followed.

Pyang-Dahl sprang out of the shadow. Her voice lashed like a whip as she ran down the road, toward the river.

"A canoe, the swiftest, we must find—"

Then she stopped, for out of the terror that gripped her like a cold hand, came the thought of the plans, the blue-prints. In some way he needed them. That she knew. It would take time to find a canoe. If she could get them, take them to him—

"Go thou. Find a boat as swiftly as can be. Have it ready. The wharf at the end of this street. Thou knowest the river men. To go all night and all day, without pause. *Quick!*" She sent him tumbling toward the river, and ran in the other direction.

At her door, the woman looked bewildered into the night.

"The word," she muttered, "She fled before I could give the word that will stop them."

CHAPTER XIV

SHE hailed the first vehicle she saw, a *tikka-gharri*, or cart; flung herself in. The driver, at her tone and word, lashed his astonished horse.

"Wait," she commanded before Sir Edward's driveway, and sped into the house.

The house seemed deserted; the servants abed; the others not returned.

She snatched the box. It would not open. She shook, pried, beat it in rage and awful haste. Finally she brought it down upon the corner of the table with a smash. It cracked. Once more, it broke. She wrenched the pieces apart, there were the stiff, blue papers.

"Shahli-Mar!" Vivian stood in the door; consternation, anger on her face. She had driven home from the dinner early. "What dost thou?"

Shahli-Mar, her face frantic, was edging toward the French doors.

"There is no time—I must go to him—I must take these—"

Vivian came forward swiftly.

"Take them, art mad—what has happened—thy clothes."

"Oh, I cannot tell thee, I must go—Dhan-star-et—danger—"

"Stop!" shouted Vivian, but she had leaped the sill. Vivian sprang after and saw her running down the drive. As she leaped into her car she heard the *tikka-gharri* rattle as it rocked down the road. And her car balked.

By the time she had it started and out of the drive, she saw the *tikka-gharri*, far down the road, wheel left under a street light and take the way through the native city. She sped after.

Straight to the river flew the *gharri*, past the house of the woman of Kim-Popal, who was scrawling a blotted, feverish message on thin paper, with a brush. She heard the clattering wheels, rushed out, but the *gharri* had disappeared. She looked at the note in her hand.

"I will take it to the river." She had heard Shahli-Mar's directions to Pyang-Dhal. "There she will come."

As she ran down the road, a small motor tooted behind her, limping on two cylinders. She looked back. The top was down, and under one of the street-lamps, the driver showed plainly.

"*Hai,*" thought the woman in amazement, "she, with a mot-ahr" and she flung herself into the middle of the narrow street and waved her arms.

The car swerved wildly to avoid her, scraped a hedge, and slowed with a scream of brakes. A furious voice addressed her. A lamp glimmered above them.

"Out of the way. Quick—"

"Nay," the woman thrust a paper into Vivian's face. "Here is the message to Lung, of Kim-Popal. He leads. Give it to him. He obeys me; my husband's power is made in that quarter. Now haste."

Certainly, all the world was demented tonight. Vivian looked at the woman intently; the faint light sketched her.

"I do not understand. Thy husband? Who? What power?"

The woman stamped impatiently. "Fool! *Sahib* Samford does this through me, his wife. Art suddenly an idiot? Go, if thou—"

"Samford."

She felt a whirling round her; a monstrous nightmare rushing into light, into reality. Through dry lips she whispered.

"Samford—what meanest thou—thy *husband?*"

"Whom else? Go!" But there she stopped. Something in the expression of the face, the voice, caught her, made her pause sharply in the swift current of her excitement. For the first time she really looked at her, saw the evening gown. She shrank back.

"Mother of Maitraya," she whispered, "thou are not—who art thou?"

But Vivian sat like stone.

"Gods!" The woman drew away in terror. Vivian shot out a hand, grasped her dress. Her voice grated.

"*Sahib* Samford, is he thy husband? Speak."

And as the woman, utterly demoralized by the successive violence of events, nodded her head and began to sob. Vivian felt something crack within her. Remotely, with faint astonishment, she looked at the shaking figure. After a time she spoke, in a voice dry as ashes, but gently authoritative.

"Come. Thou wilt come to my house for we must talk. I am one who hath also been wronged, but not by thee. Come."

The Burmese woman made a helpless little gesture. "I do not understand," she said dully. "Who was she, thy double."

"I will tell. All. Come quickly." Her superior will won. The woman lurched almost mechanically into the car.

Far out upon the dark river, a canoe leaped northward to swinging paddles. Amidships crouched Shahli-Mar, and on the wharfhead, Pyang-Dhal strained his eyes into the night long after it had vanished.

PROMPTLY at ten Samford swung up the path to Sir Edward's bungalow. He looked with relief toward the dance—toward anything that would take him for a time, a brief respite, out of himself, out of the events which, darker and more swift, seemed to be whirring forward with an increasing fury, carrying him with them.

Since his arrangement, through his wife, for the coup d'etat at the mine-site, this uncanny sense of being carried forward on a swiftly moving belt, had sharply increased. He had slept little; his nerves were taut as fiddle strings; he went about his business with his usual masked face and drooped lids. But sometimes, especially when alone, he caught himself listening to the whir of that swift belt carrying him, and experienced a moment of dizziness, checked himself on the edge, as it were, of a plunge off it, into nothingness. He drank heavily.

And his hatred of Starrett steadily increased, woven with this awful sense of a rushing, an accelerated fate. If Starrett were finished, out of the way, it would stop. It was he, working at his machinery, building daily, working at top speed, that sucked the belt along so fast. Starrett, far up the river, working, working, more and more swiftly, piling bolt upon bar until the whole great structure began to move, to tear into the empty gravel, devouring it in gulps. He it was who pulled the levers, faster, faster and faster.

He wiped his forehead, looked round with a start, realized he had halted half way up the path to the bungalow.

Vivian. Would she at the appointed moment, in that quick and hidden flight he planned, go with him? Did he hold her enough to sweep her free with him? He wanted her as a proof of his power. To make her go with him . . . if only that awful swift, whirring belt would stop.

Shaking his head as if to clear it, he rang the bell.

Vivian met him at the door, evaded his arms, talking rapidly in a level voice.

"Oh come in Allan. Sit down. I'm not quite ready. Excuse me a moment." She disappeared into the room beyond, closed the door. He dropped into a chair, hardly noticing the curious staccato key of her utterance, missing entirely, in the rather dim light, the pallor of her face. His mind buzzed and whirred.

Presently she returned, and stood, her back to the door into the adjoining room. Her lips twisted in a little smile, her eyes were very bright. She looked at him an instant before speaking, and Samford got up quickly.

"Allan, are you quite sure you want to go to the dance with me?"

He looked intently at her. The effort cleared his vision. "What is it, Vivian?"

She laughed softly. "Oh nothing, nothing. But it occurred to me that you might want to take someone else."

He came close to her. "You're ragging me about something. For God's sake drop it. I'm too nervy tonight to appreciate it." But he looked at her even more intently, and with a swift uneasiness.

She laughed again. "Indeed! Then doubtless a quiet evening would suit you better, a quiet domestic evening—with your wife."

"What do you mean?"

She swept on unheeding. "I'd be delighted to loan you my drawing room. You—you are so at home here. And I'm sure you'll have much to talk about." And before he could move or speak, she had swung open the door into the next room. In the threshold stood Chang-Kopa.

For a moment none moved nor spoke. Then the Burmese woman advanced slowly. Vivian drew aside. The woman's eyes danced like black flames in the white mask of her face. Samford had gone gray.

She began in a voice quite toneless, void of emotion. In that level voice, somehow more terrible than any ranting, with her hands hanging before her, and her eyes never stirring from Samford's face, she recited the whole story of her love for him; of their secret marriage and her concealment. Mercilessly she exposed herself, her blind devotion. She spoke rapidly, without falter or stop, almost like one reciting. Once or twice he tried to interrupt, raised his hands, then dropped them again. His face, too, was blank; masked. Vivian had a sense of listening to some detached and tragic drama.

"For thee I have forsaken my people. For thee I have risked all, and contrived to bring about thy wishes. I have schemed and planned that a man I never saw might be destroyed, because I loved thee, and would strew thy way with dead bodies if need be."

She laughed, a sharp sudden little laugh like a thrown dagger.

"But from that, at least, the gods have saved me."

The change in her voice from monotonous abstraction to sudden ferocity jerked the scene, the situation, into reality for Vivian. She saw Samford's eyes contract swiftly; his masked face come alive, fierce, alert.

"What meanest thou?"

She laughed again, and fairly spat the words. "Ah, fool, that touches thee? Listen. The last play is over. Thou art finished. Even now the sister of her," a hand jerked toward Vivian—"goes up the river to warn her man. She is gone. The gods grant she be in time."

"Gone—when—"

The woman's lips twisted in a grin of venom. She began rocking a little. "Yes, gone tonight, two hours gone, gone to warn her man. Thou art finished, finished, finished;" her voice trailed off into a long hysterical laugh.

In the very midst of it Samford glared round him, pressed his hands to his head, and with a maddened, furious cry, sprang for the door. In his twisting brain was one thought, beating like an insane drum, to stop that bearer of warning, to reach the mine-site first.

Hatless, and in dinner clothes, he tore down the street.

Half an hour later Donahey, night watchman of the mining company's warehouse, was talking to a friend, his usually placid eyes protruding with amazement.

"He comes flyin' in 'ere like a crazy man. 'Git me the launch,' sez he, 'an' petrol for a twenty-four hours run,' an' swears like a sailor. I jumped, I tell ye. Then he was off along the river front an' back with a nigger pilot, scared 'arf to death. Lucky the launch was ready; Carson'd 'ad it during the day. I dumped in extra cans o' petrol, an' e' was off like a shot. 'E yelled at me as she swung out 'Tell Mr. Langhorn I've had news of trouble at the mine' sez 'e, an' was gone in the dark. Gawd;" Donahey rubbed his red nose in awe; "must be some bloody show on."

CHAPTER XV

DARKNESS falls over the land, and over the little Chang. Along its shores the shadows gather in the caverns where the silk-cotton overhangs and the broad spotted leaf of the bignone trails in the silent water. The trees are black against the sky, which turns from turquoise to electric blue, and to purple. The little scarlet-breasted parrokeets chatter sleepily in the cutch trees and fall silent. The last bit of day, Nature's final expiration, ebbs away, and there is a pause, a stop, before she begins to draw in her breath; a moment of balance in which nothing stirs.

Then a soft shiver runs across the river; the little green frogs with suction feet emit preparatory throaty quavers. In the dark caverns by the bank the night birds, herons and small aigrets, begin to prowl solemnly.

Up the Chang, a shadow among shadows, comes a canoe, nosing this way and that across the river, seeking the current's least resistance. It moves at good speed, but its paddlers bend to their stroke with numb arms. It has still four miles to go. In the center crouches a girl with a face set like a white porphyry mask, and a tongue that urges, urges; now it flickers like a whip across the tired shoulders of the paddlers, now it cajoles and entreats. Always it drives, drives, drives.

Not a great distance behind, yet so remote that the winding river as yet carries no sound of it upstream, follows a light-draft launch, its engine put-putting sturdily. In the bow a terrified pilot, a Shan man with tattooed cheeks, steers. In the stern sits a rigid, bare-headed figure of a man; collarless, the white curve of his dress shirt streaked black, the crumpled lapels of his dinner-coat daubed with grease; he sits with a drawn automatic. Since that time six hours ago when the pilot, caught in a zone of river-mist, ran the launch on a mud-bank and fouled the propeller, tying them up two hours, that figure in the stern had not spoken. He sits silent.

The night darkens. A three-quarters moon flits in and out between rapidly scudding clouds; vanishes and reappears erratically, then vanishes altogether as the clouds thicken. A dull and uncertain light covers river and tree.

In the forest between the village of Kim-Popal and the mine-site, the darkness is alive with men. Many men, moving softly. Slipping from shadow to shadow, while overhead the tops of the trees sway and rustle in the lifting wind, and gusts of moonlight sweep across the woods, turning it black and silver a moment, then vanishing to leave it an even smear of near-dark, as the clouds gather across the moon. The men carry *daks*, the long knife of the forest people, and bows and arrows, and spears. They filter through the woods, spread out in an irregular line like advancing skirmishers. Their leader is a thick-set graying Chin, who believes he is to avenge his daughter's husband. They do not talk. They number about two hundred.

Shahli-Mar, scanning the half-visible banks, presently saw, as the canoe rounded a bend, two distant shadowy pillars, giant pyingado trees, shooting up above the surrounding foliage. Her voice caught in a sob of relief. A scant two miles more, and she would be there; not at the village of Kim-Popal, but at the nearer spot where the short-cut footpath by which she had piloted Dan, led inland from the river to her own village. It cut the distance from five to two miles. Moreover, it enabled her to avoid possible encounter with the attacking force. She shut her eyes and prayed desperately.

A sound obtruded, faint, varying, a curious staccato beat penetrating among the swish of the paddles and the grunts of the exhausted men. It came stronger. Now it caught their ears as well, and they unconsciously slowed their stroke a little to listen.

The steersman gasped. "*Ah-chung-gao* (power boat)" he whispered. "We are followed. None come this way."

"Quick, quick. *Tzing-kub 'han*"—Shahli-Mar's voice flicked and bit, rallying the men, so that the breaking ragged stroke picked up again, and fear giving new strength, they sent the canoe leaping. She beat her hands; she praised them; she promised fables. And the grunting men bent their tired backs under her goading and buckled to a longer pull.

From here to her goal the river lay fairly straight. From behind the put-put-put steadily grew louder. She had turned in the canoe and watched. For a long time she saw nothing; heard only that tireless, slowly growing noise of the invisible pursuer.

Minutes passed, it came clearer and stronger now. But there, ahead, lay the last stretch. The spat-spat-spat rang from bank to bank of the muffled river. A deadly silence had fallen over the canoe; even the grunting of the men had stopped. The swish and fall of the paddles, swish and fall. Spat-spat-spat behind them, out of the murky dark.

Then the clouds above swirled erratically apart, out flooded the moonlight; banks black with shadow, river smooth with glints of light, and behind, not a hundred yards behind, clear and white, the shape of the launch. At the same instant a cry; a man's voice, high and strained, insane with rage, tearing raggedly across the silence.

"Stop—stop."

Then a crack, flash, *tzzzing*, as the automatic spoke and the bullet whanged and ricocheted beside them. Ducking and cringing, she cried: "In—in—under the trees."

Again the crack. The paddler in front of her made a clotted, sucking noise, and fell forward. The canoe staggered and nosed toward the bank. The white launch seemed to leap ahead. Cries, the crack of the automatic, that high, insane voice.

The bank shadowed close. With a clutch that ripped her wrapped silk skirt from hem to waist, she tumbled over the side into the water. A paddle struck her shoulder. Then she was clear, swimming, the current bearing her down. But already she was in shadow of the trees, closer, closer, in. Her knees struck something, bottom.

Dripping, she crawled out into the black shadow. The clouds had swept again over the moon. From the center of the river came mixed shouts. Then the voice of Samford, cracking orders, cursing. As nearly as she could see, the two boats clung confusedly together a moment, then the launch drew away, heading upstream.

"He has gone to Kim-Popal," she thought, shivering in her wet clothes, "to make them hurry. But they will have gone by now." Moving cautiously she picked her way along the shore, over roots and around thickets. Invisible small creatures scuttled away with a rattling of leaves. After ten minutes of such going, she picked up the faint trail she sought, marked by its giant twin pyangado trees. Here was a clear view of the river, dusky under the diffused light. There was no sign of either craft. She listened intently. From upstream came a moment, as the wind veered, the *put-put-put* of the launch. Then it vanished.

Tucking up her torn skirt, she started through the woods at a swift trot; the mile-eating pace of forest people. The faint light sufficed. High above, the tops of the great trees rustled and sighed, but round her the heavy air did not move.

HALF an hour later she paused where the path joined the main trail from Kim-Popal to her village; paused to listen. The thumping of her heart filled her ears. As it lessened she heard nothing but the night-noises of the forest. If the attack had begun she could have heard it, unless it were already over.

She began to go swiftly down the trail toward the mine-site; walking like a cat, elastic, tense; ready to jump or drop. The night helped her. It had thickened to something soft and darkly woolly.

"If I but knew more." Her thoughts raced round her head. "They come from Kim-Popal, and wait in the woods for a signal—till some fall upon the Sikhs. That means they are on the other side of the clearing and I can reach the little house. But if they plan to surround the clearing, and fall upon the house at once?"

So she slowed her pace. But the forest showed nothing. And presently, through the high and thinning trees ahead, she saw a glimmer of fire-light, flashing, and presently she was creeping to the very edge of the clearing, her heart in her throat, her eyes wide with amazement, relief like a wine in her blood. Across the cleared space, with the skeleton of the near-completed dredge in silhouette against them, blazed the fires of the camp; she made out the men, strolling, sitting; a small picture in rose and black set in darkness, the Sikhs bent together in a circle. Directly before her, fifty yards distant, was the back of the little bamboo house. He must be there.

She was already creeping forward when the darkness at her very side spoke in a whisper.

"No further; dost not remember—to the trees edge, till the word be given."

She lay quite flat a moment, numb with the sudden fright. They were, then, all round the clearing, and she had walked straight among them. The whisper continued.

"It is not long now. See; they gather round the Sikhs."

She began to edge forward. Sharply the whisper followed.

"Son of a buffalo—wait—"

But she was running, doubled in the darkness, toward the house. Behind her a muffled exclamation.

With the sense of nightmare hands clutching her heels, she stumbled up the steps and into the room.

He had been reading, the oil lamp before him, and for an instant did nothing but stare, sitting as he had whirled, hand clenching pipe half way to his mouth. Then as she stumbled toward him he sprang to meet her and she fell into his arms.

"Shahli-Mar—what?"

But her hands beat his chest.

"Oh, quick, quick—the gun—get the Sikhs."

Behind the tumbled words he caught the urgent terror in her voice. His hands gripped her arms; he looked sharply into her face.

"What is it?"

She stamped in an agony of fear; her cursed English.

"Oh, call the Sikhs, with guns—the men of Kim-Popal they are all around to kill you—it is Samford—"

But she got no further, for from without came a sudden burst of shouts, a sharp cry, then the roar of a man in rage and pain. Instantly from all round, rose an answering cry, a shout from hundreds of voices.

Dan sprang to the door. Beside the fire a confused mass struggled; through the faint fire-light that lit the clearing, streaked shadows, pouring out of the woods, crying as they came, shouting, converging toward the house.

He whipped shut the door; fastened it; upended the piece of corrugated iron that served as table top, cascading books and papers to the floor, flattened it against the low window, and blocked it with the heavy logs on which it had rested. His mind, still dark as to causes and confused by suddenness, jumped to the points of his situation. That afternoon he had ordered the Sikhs not patrolling to stack their guns in the shack during supper instead of in a pile beside them. The four guns—he glanced swiftly—stood in a corner. But the ammunition, save for that in the magazine, were with the Sikhs, outside the yells rose louder.

Pulses hammering, he lifted his folding cot, blankets and all, and blocked the other window, in the back, and toward the woods Dhang-way. Then he examined the guns and cursed. Two of them showed full magazines, the others, but three cartridges apiece. The Sikhs had grown careless. He put the guns beside him, examined the walls. Roughly joined, the heavy bamboo afforded loopholes beside both windows and the door.

Only then did he turn to Shahli-Mar. She stood in the middle of the room, her face set, her eyes sunken and black. He handed her a gun.

"Know how to use this?" His own face was white, but he smiled, a crooked, tender, fighting smile. She shook her head, swayed on her feet; made a little choking sound. Her hands fluttered to her head. She sagged against him.

"Oh God—don't faint—not now—Shahli-Mar," he gripped her. "You're not hurt—"

Suddenly from outside the confused sounds rose in a sudden climax; two sharp reports sounded. Something struck the roof. It stiffened the drooping girl. A curious expression, wildly careless, almost exalted, lit her face.

"No," she whispered fiercely, "all right, Dhan-star-et—where you are."

He sprang for the coal-oil lamp, blew it out. Utter darkness shut them in. "Keep down, lie on the floor," he ordered. Queer madness, a kind of ecstasy, suddenly filled him. Eye to a cranny in the bamboo wall, and gun in hand, he looked out.

The clearing showed uncertainly, lit by the camp-fires. Between them and himself, an uncertain dark mass showed, advancing, spreading; a mass that undulated and mingled with the darkness. They were coming at the shack; spreading to surround it. The sharp individual shouts settled to a steady blur of sound, the hoarse, menacing roar of a mob.

He waited till they were within fifty yards, then opened fire; it was blind guesswork. Staccato cries told that one shot at least had landed. He emptied one gun; found another. The note of the roar lifted sharply, then ebbed almost to silence. They had not expected that.

He waited. They withdrew; came in again. Again he raked the darkness, this time with better effect, apparently. But in swift answer came a continuous rattle of fire that brought his heart into his throat. A ripping whistle somewhere in the roof of the shack; a deadly *tzing tzing;* a double clang from the corrugated iron at the window. He dropped and called in sudden blinding fear:

"Shahli-Mar! Shahli-Mar!"

He felt her beside him instantly; threw an arm over her fiercely.

"You're all right?"

"All right, Dhan-star-et." Her voice sang high and hard above the rattle of the guns. Abruptly it ceased. Cautiously he got to his feet; peered out. The shouting had dropped to a confused babble of voices; the fires were lower; he could make out little. Came a hiss and a rattling thump against walls and roof.

"Arrows. They must have used up all their ammunition in that volley. Just had those two Sikh guns," he guessed, and wiped his forehead with a hand that shook.

THERE followed a long period, it seemed centuries, of waiting. As nearly as he could see, they were taking counsel. He paced about in the dark, peering out one side and another, his nerves tightening. And to counter this unbearable tension of inaction, they whispered, crouched in the darkness, his arms about her. He questioned, and in bits, she told him: her overhearing of Samford, the flight up the river, the pursuit, her escape into the woods, and her reaching him.

As he listened to the quaint whispered English, the devotion behind that incredible tale so artlessly revealed, sank deeper and deeper in him, overwhelming him with such shame and such gladness that his very soul seemed to melt within him, his whole being grow fluid and dissolved marvellously with love.

The whispering voice stopped; he felt her fumbling in her bosom, then there pressed into his hands a sodden something—wet paper—

"And I—I got the picture-drawings, Dhan-star-et—as I promised, so—"

"Oh, Shahli-Mar, Shahli-Mar," the flood within him rose, broke, and his arms had tightened round her and his lips found hers.

The rattle of arrows on the walls wrenched him up; jerked him sickeningly into the reality of the present, suddenly made doubly terrible to him. He fired two shots; on the second the trigger clicked. His third gun gone. He fumbled for the fourth; found it. Outside the menacing voices rose again; took on a rhythm. Again the wait, nerve-tightening. They were perhaps summoning courage to rush the shack. If he could out-bluff them, if he could hold them off, perhaps until morning, their courage might, with the sun, desert them utterly. If he could not—

Swiftly he turned in the darkness; felt her beside him; spoke brokenly above the shouting that rose and fell.

"Shahli-Mar, dearest," he felt her quick hands upon his face, "when this is over—if anything *should* happen—I want you to know I want you always—for my wife—my *sahiba*."

For an instant she only pressed against him. "Dhan-star-et," the whisper came slowly; "you know I am *stengha*, half-caste."

Roughly he smothered the words. "Don't—don't—can't you understand—I love you."

She slipped away as a sharp lift in the shouting without sent him to the wall, to expend one precious shot in the darkness. The shouting dropped a moment, then rose again. It seemed largely in front of the shack, toward the clearing.

Sitting upon the floor, she prayed confusedly. The ecstasy of that rough, almost shocked assurance, mingled with the deadly fear that circled them. Oh, if she could send her thought, as the *hpungis* claimed they could, to her grandfather, to her village, could get them word. She closed her eyes and centered her mind. Her hands tightened on the light planking of the floor. Under her grasp, it lifted. It was loose.

Suddenly her eyes flew open; she began to think frantically. The flooring of such houses was, she knew, a yard above the ground . . .

With quick hands she tore a section from her skirt and bound it round her head, in the fashion of a Chin boy, drawing the ends tight across her bosom and knotting them.

Mutely she sent her thought across the dark toward him. "My beloved one, my beloved one," she stretched out her arms, feeling within their circle the warm strength of his body, in her fingers the crisp vigor of his hair. Then, softly, she lifted a plank; then another.

Dan, intent at the peep-hole, strained his eyes into the dark. It was impossible to see. The thickening clouds had extinguished even the faint light of the moon behind them.

Behind him in the shack he heard a faint wooden rattle. "Shahli-Mar," he whispered. "What are you doing?" But his attention remained outside. Five minutes passed, ten.

Then the character of the sound changed. The mixed shouting of voices, dropped to a faint murmur, broke into component parts, took on a sound almost as of argument. Straining his ears, he fancied he could detect a single voice among the many—an imperative voice that urged, clearer in tone, almost familiar. There fell a moment close to silence, in which he heard the rustle, the unmistakable shuffling thud, of innumerable, advancing feet.

He stiffened. That voice. Across his mind ran a flash of intuition. Samford, failing to forestall the warning, had arrived to direct the attack.

As if to cap his thought came the single high *spat* of an automatic pistol, and a bullet ripped the bamboo. It was followed by a roar of voices. He dropped to the floor.

"Shahli-Mar," he called sharply, "keep flat. Where are you?" Then, "Shahli-Mar! Shahli-Mar!"

Wildly he flung himself down—felt the darkness—calling, calling. He dropped a dozen matches. Finally one flared up, lighting the little room.

He was alone. And in the flooring, gaped a hole, where two planks had been lifted aside.

Outside the voices rose savagely.

CHAPTER XVI

SHE edged herself forward inch by inch, flat to the ground, taking the direction away from the clearing, toward the nearest forest. She could see nothing, but before her, to left and right, she could hear movement, voices. They circled the shack, at a distance of some fifty yards.

She knew her hope was in penetrating that line unnoticed in the darkness, the excitement. Slowly she wormed herself along, creeping from grass tuft to low bush. And her eyes, becoming accustomed to their surroundings, began to distinguish major outlines; the black mass of the forest against the sky.

She reached the little stream. Dimly she made out uncertain shapes, groups that moved and whispered. She crawled through the cool water, lay a moment under the cover of a huge-leafed water plant. Before her seemed to be a clear space. She made out snatches of the whispered excited words.

". . . it is owl's folly. Who am I to rush in upon a *sahib*, and he with a house full of guns. Four are hurt to death already."

". . . They told us this devil-machine offended the gods, and we must destroy its *sahib*. Better prayers before the Little Buddha, say I, and a curry for the *hpungis* . . ."

". . . say the house is full of gold, and there will be loot for all. Rush all together, say I . . ."

"They are without a leader here," thought Shahli-Mar. "That serves."

She hunched forward, and out of the darkness two men blundered over her. She flinched under the foot, rolled sidewise like a hedgehog. The men fell, swearing at each other. She lay with held breath while they got to their feet. Others passed.

But she was well in the woods edge now. Crouching from tree to tree, she began running; made the trail, and sped down its hard-packed surface.

She found half the village awake and listening excitedly at the gate. The sound of guns travels far in silent country. They clustered round her, as she darted through them, leaving an increasing wave of excitement as the news spread. The men of Kim-Popal were armed, they attacked the good *sahib* by the machine, they would attack them next. Men dived into their houses and came out with *dahs* and spears. A chorus of shouts began to spread.

She found her grandfather and before he could speak flung herself into his amazed arms, gasped out her story between breaths. Before she had finished he had snatched the *koh*, the wooden trumpet sounded in times of danger, and the long, challenging tones were rolling across the village. Answering it rose a mounting roar of voices as the men surged toward the gate, massed shadows pushing along the streets.

Keshoo, watching the drawn white face, spoke briefly, arm about her shoulders.

"He loves thee, thy *sahib?*"

"Judge! He would make me his *sahiba*, believing me to be of mixed blood. Oh why do they not hurry?" She struck her hands. A man strode up, a three foot *dah* shining in his hand.

"We are gathered. Oh Keshoo, let us fall upon the stealers of cattle."

"They surround the house of the *sahib*. Fall upon them from this side, and drive them back."

"They have attacked a *sahib*, and our place will be cursed. Fall upon them—"

Wild with excitement, the men streamed up. Down the long village street, between fires, they came, shouting. The *dahs* caught the firelight in orange streaks.

With Keshoo and Shahli-Mar at their head, they swept out into the darkness of the forest. At the gate women wailed and clutched their children.

It was swift as prairie fire and strange as dreams, that march through the forest. The clouds thinned as they went and long before they reached the clearing the moon was barring the trail white and the shadows were crisp and hard. They went silently, only the multiple thudding of many bare feet, the swish of cloth, and the occasional *tang* of metal as *dah* jostled *dah*.

Only once did Keshoo speak. "Now I can tell thy *sahib*," he panted, "what I longed to tell. Now I know he loves thee. I was not sure."

"What then?" Shahli-Mar wasted no words: her side ached.

"A matter thou wilt not understand, but he will. Rememberest thou the holy place, the ruined pagoda behind the village, by the stream where the first hills are? There is land heavy with gold. I know. I have kept the secret long. A fitting dowry for a *sahiba.*" Shahli-Mar hardly heard him. Her mind was straining ahead, toward the clearing.

As they drew nearer, the shouting of voices, a single blurred noise, reached them. Like the falls of a river. Under the stirring challenge of that sound they leaped. Shahli-Mar and Keshoo were thrust aside by the pouring men. The clearing came in sight, a round patch of white at the end of the trail.

They reached it; a glimpse through the trees. She sobbed. Clear in the hard light, the mass of figures surrounded the house, closed in to a tight circle. Above the shouts came the occasional crack of a pistol.

Clinging to Keshoo, she saw the men of Dhang surge out, roaring, into the clearing; saw them fall upon the thick mass round the house; saw them mingle and merge. The tone of the shouting changed, sharp individual cries, consternation, panic. The surging black mass began to move slowly across the clearing, the flash of the *dash* glinting in it like fire-flies. It paused; moved again. Moved faster. It broke into spreading streaming lines stretching toward the wood across the clearing, meeting, parting; a tangling skein, as the men of Dhang chased the flying besiegers toward their village.

As the last of the pursuers were abruptly swallowed in the black shadows of the woods, Shahli-Mar felt herself go slack. The long strain was broken. The moonlight danced oddly. The scene retreated. She clutched at Keshoo, and slid deep, for a long moment into unconsciousness. In sudden fear he caught her, lowering her to the ground.

Thus it happened that they did not see a single black figure that had dropped into a gravel pit and let the flying rout pass over and round it; that began creeping, flat to the ground, back into the shadow of the shack.

The faintness passed quickly; she opened her eyes to see Keshoo bending over her. Quickly she sat up.

"Dhan-star-et," she whispered and turned to the shack; rose and stepped toward the now silent clearing. "Nay—I am right again"—as his arms still held her. The old man looked at her intently; with a sigh his arms dropped.

"Go to him, then," he said. "It is safe now, my child. We—our part is finished." His voice shook a little, but he smiled. "See," he pointed.

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE brilliant moonlight a white figure had come out of the house, hesitating, then with quick strides. It stopped; spun round, looking.

"Shahli-Mar—Shahli-Mar!" The voice, ragged with anxiety, rang against the woods. He was looking away from her, across the clearing. She had already sprung toward him, her voice was at her lips, calling his name.

Suddenly, another figure, black, crouching, leaping from the shadow of the shack, arm out stiffly, a glint of metal tipping it, Samford.

Before she could move, before her tightened throat could utter, the cry that seemed frozen there, he spoke.

"Starrett."

Dan whirled; saw the end of an automatic, and behind it a face knotted with rage, a white insane face under the white moon. He could hear the man's teeth grind, as he advanced, crouching, slow, spitting his words.

"Don't run. Stand up and take it. You would try to fight me, would you? You would stick your fingers into my business." There was a whitish froth on the lips, the dark mustache; Dan could see it, white in the pale light. He could see two tiny moons in the staring eyes, one on each side of that round sightless eye of the gun, advancing, steadily at him. The distracted voice lifted almost to a howl.

"You would look for trouble—well, take it, *take it!*"

A fraction before the flash Dan ducked and sprang. The bodies locked, rolled tumbling, bounding, on the ground. Shahli-Mar was running forward, running, crying out. As she reached them, the twisting mass of arms, legs, black and white, snarling like an animal, bounded up. Two arms, wrists gripped, shot up stiff, as one, swung down and round in an arc. The arms bent sharply; the gripped, entangled hands wrenched down chest high, pressed between the two straining bodies. The slippery, hidden, grappling, seeking fingers fought, tore, tightened; slowly, under the quivering pressure, one wrist bent inward. A muffled report, and a coughing sob, and the dark body of Samford dropped.

Dan stood, swaying, dizzy, half-conscious. Something caught at his arms, something cried in his ear. Hands, and a voice he knew, but remotely, distantly. . . . Then the dizziness, the blinding body-anger was passing, and he saw Shahli-Mar, before him.

He looked at her vacantly, his body shaking. Then with a half-sob he took her in his arms.

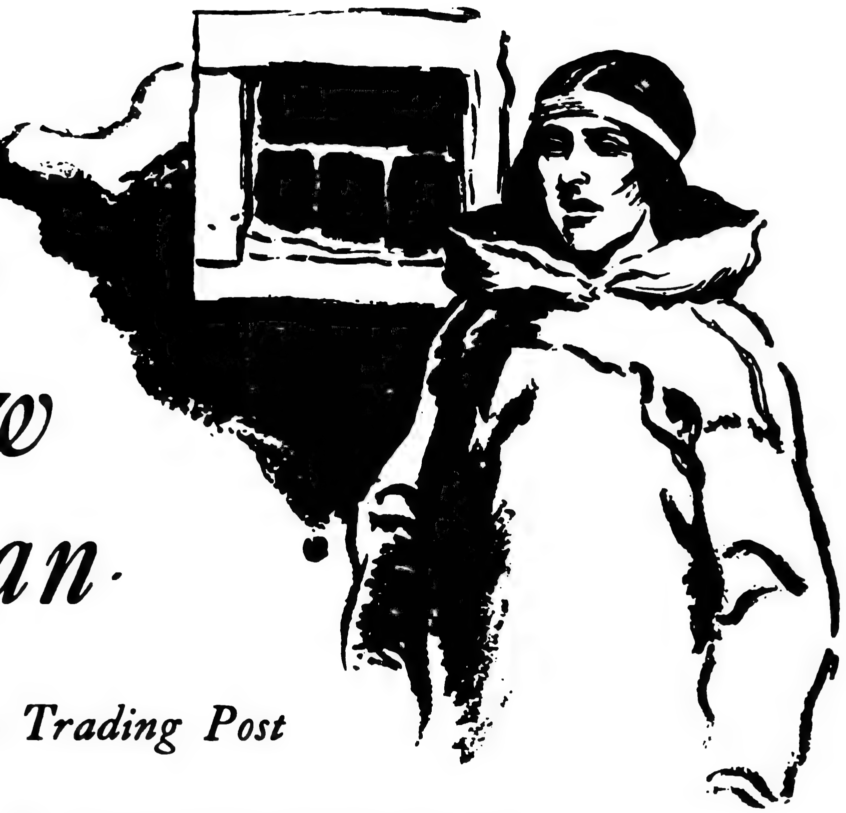
"Shahli-Mar," he whispered. "Shahli-Mar."

Old Keshoo watched them for a moment carved in an embrace as still as the still figure forgotten upon the ground; then he looked up at the impersonal white beauty of the night. A life finished; lives to come. The changeless, inscrutable pattern of existence, wearing out, renewing itself untiring; the unswerving Wheel of Being.

With bent head and treading softly, he walked slowly away.

THE END

The Crow Woman



A Drama of a Trading Post

By ARTHUR CHAPMAN

FROM the bastion at a corner of the stockade, Antoine Leclair, trading post clerk, looked out upon things white and familiar.

Glistening snow stretched everywhere, in great, motionless billows so deep that it seemed as if the brown ghastliness of the hills of sage and prickly pear must be buried forever. Those billows converged gently to the winding, level line that marked the feeble beginnings of the Missouri. There were no trees, and the rose bushes along the river were buried like everything else—like everything save the trading post and Antoine and the Crow woman.

From the river Antoine could trace the faint line of footsteps made by his unwelcome visitor. The clerk, mild and effeminate looking, swore an anemic oath as he noticed that the tracks had not yet been covered by the snow wisps which the restless winds drove with a rasping sound across the white crust.

"*Diable!*" exclaimed Antoine. "Dose moccasin track' should have been cover' by now. Gauché and his Assiniboines will follow like wolves."

The moccasin tracks which brought such dismay to the clerk had meant the only break in long days of monotony. They had been made only yesterday evening. Antoine, half drugged by the sustained silence of the plains, had been roused by a knock at the great outer gate which led to the snow-drifted compound. As he thrust a rifle and a perturbed face through the circular opening, where visitors must submit to scrutiny, a woman's voice came to him:

"No shoot! Me Crow woman. Let 'um in."

There were no other Indians in sight, so Antoine lowered the heavy wooden bar and the woman staggered in, her clothing as snowy as the great void from which she had come.

Antoine led the way to the main room, where there was fire and food. When the woman took off the blanket which had wrapped her head and shoulders, and shook its accumulated snow crystals into the fire, Antoine stared in amazement at her beauty. Though he had not been long at the outposts, he had seen many Indian women: Assiniboines, Piegans, Crows and Sioux.

But here was the fairest tribeswoman he had ever looked upon.

Like most Crows, she was tall. Even the exhaustion which gripped her at the end of her journey in the snow could not rob her of a grace of bearing which told of youth. Her skin was light colored. In half-profile the oval line of her face was unbroken by the high cheek bones common to Indians. She spoke just enough English to make herself understood. Once or twice, when she and Antoine came to a verbal *impasse*, she smiled, and the melancholy in her eyes gave way to little, dancing lights.

Antoine soon had what there was to tell. She had been captured by the Assiniboines a month before, and had fled their camp. Across the deepest snows of years she had struggled toward the Crow country. The last day's journey had nearly spelled the end. The snow crust had softened just enough to break under her weight. Her moccasins were cut and her feet were bleeding. She had fallen many times in traversing the short upthrust from the river to the trading post. One sleep in the snow and—

Antoine brought new moccasins and she put them on, gratefully. The clerk was kind-hearted. He would aid this Crow woman to get back to her people. Only one thought disturbed him. If the Assiniboines were to follow the moccasin tracks and come clamoring at the gate! And the girl had fled from the worst of all; the warriors under Gauché, that strange, evil genius who was first aid to the devil himself. There was no trader who did not fear Gauché, or Left-Hand, the boldly cynical, whose cry of *Cohan* (hurry up) had been heard and heeded in every post to the Yellowstone—Gauché the poisoner, who mixed strange brews for his victims and watched the resulting death agonies.

It would not do to offend Gauché, yet the Crows were to be considered. They were friendly, and good traders. If this Crow woman could be returned to them unharmed, it would mean many beaver pelts and buffalo robes in the little post where Antoine was serving his first clerkship. There might be promotion. Perhaps it would mean a comfortable place at Fort Union, where the clerks sat on high stools and had real desks.

Such a prospect pleased Antoine, and he sat in front of the fire and smoked much and dreamed, while the Crow woman ate hungrily of jerked buffalo meat, about the only fare the post larder afforded. It was because there was only jerked buffalo meat that Antoine was alone, the other men at the post having gone to Fort Union for supplies. They would be back in two or three days, unless they became too drunk.

The Crow woman did not break into Antoine's dreaming. Silently she took in every detail of the room, with the keen yet unemotional curiosity of her people. It was a long room, with a fireplace at one side. Along the wall to the left of the fireplace was a bunk, curtained with heavy blankets, where Antoine slept. The room was in disorder. There was a pile of half-cured pelts in one corner. Some empty sacks were scattered at Antoine's side in front of the fireplace. In the corner opposite the pile of pelts were several traps. Mostly they were for beaver, but there was one with more powerful jaws, capable of holding a bear. By the door was a rack of firearms, which Antoine never touched. He was a wretched marksman, and his superior had said:

"Antoine, if the Indians threaten, let them come in the post, but not until you have spread all these guns on the table. Then let them look in the window, and they will be frightened at what they see and will go away."

But Antoine had never been forced to make such a display, and he prayed that he would not have to, as he was a man of peace, terrified by the frontier's blood-lusts, yet held by its charm.

By the sag of the Crow woman's shoulders, Antoine knew that she had reached the point of exhaustion. Lighting a candle, he motioned her to follow along a narrow passageway skirting the stockade and leading to the men's quarters. Here he pointed to some buffalo robes and went back to his pipe at the fireside, knowing that she would sleep well.

Antoine himself did not sleep as dreamlessly as he might.

THE thought of the Assiniboines was with him, and twice he scrambled out from behind the blankets that curtained his comfortable bunk, thinking he had heard a knocking at the outer gate. But in the morning all was quiet. He prepared breakfast, with an extra cup of the precious coffee for the Crow woman. When he went to call her, he found that she was up. She followed him silently to the great room. Her beauty seemed even more pronounced in the daylight that filtered dimly through the small windows, but Antoine's mind did not dwell upon it for long. While she was eating, he had climbed to the bastion, and, to his dismay, had found that the moccasin tracks had not been quite obliterated by the snow.

In the distance, a black spot on the snow caught Antoine's unpracticed eye. He studied it with a field glass. It grew steadily larger, and soon Antoine cursed again, this time in terror.

"MacIvor!" he exclaimed. "I had sooner see dat devil Gauché."

The figure steadily grew larger. The crust of snow had hardened overnight, and, along the expanse which had afforded such treacherous footing to the Crow woman, the man approached with ease.

He was a big man, square of shoulders and with a long, powerful stride which told of a lavish gift of strength. That was MacIvor, strength and wickedness. Antoine knew of his deeds; how his villainies had been too great for the trading company, which usually asked no questions so long as it got the furs. He had heard of MacIvor's orgies of drunkenness and the killing of red men and white when provocation was negligible. Also Antoine had heard that MacIvor bore no good will toward the trading company that had taken his post from him. MacIvor, reduced from trader to free trapper, had taken his grudge with him to the Assiniboines. There had been rumors that, with skin stained and war bonnet trailing, MacIvor had been with Gauché on many raids which had cost white lives. It was the well educated ones like MacIvor, so the frontier said, who came the nearest to meeting the devil half-way when they turned renegade.

Antoine grudgingly answered MacIvor's hail, and slowly descended to the compound to admit the trapper. There was no such thing as keeping MacIvor from a post that had only one man, and that man a clerk, to defend it.

MacIvor's teeth flashed in something between a grin and a snarl as he entered the compound.

"Up early, Antoine!" was his greeting. "Some coffee, and after that some of the company's best whisky. I know where it's kept, man, if it chance you may have forgotten."

Antoine's heart sank still lower. It was bad enough to deal with a sober MacIvor, but if the trapper were to start drinking...

"How far you come, MacIvor?" asked Antoine casually enough as he led the way to the great room.

"Farther than you could ever have walked through this snow, Frenchy," laughed the trapper, as he slammed the door behind him, with a booming noise that echoed through the trading post like a cannon shot. "I've come far enough to make me hungry and thirsty. Remember that."

The clerk silently brought on meat and the last of his biscuits. As he put the coffee pot on the fire, he noticed that there was no sign of the Crow woman in the room. Probably she had fled to some distant part of the post, in a vain effort to hide—vain because MacIvor's former stewardship had made him familiar with every corner of the place. No matter where she had hidden herself, the trapper would hunt her out when he was ready.

MacIvor seemed to be in no hurry about anything. He stood in front of the fireplace, leisurely divesting himself of his outer wraps. To make more room for himself he kicked aside the empty sacking, most of it falling in front of Antoine's bunk. A strange headdress of fur gave MacIvor a demoniacal appearance in the fireglow which fought with the dim daylight. It was the skin of a huge lynx, with the head left complete, and with yellow eyes and white teeth gleaming—a tribute to the skill of some Indian taxidermist. It was the sort of headdress which, on a medicine man, would frighten the children of an Indian camp into convulsions. Antoine was relieved when MacIvor laid it off, exposing a touseled thatch of iron-gray hair. Across the Scotsman's forehead ran a livid scar, the grim reminder of a knife battle with a *voyageur* on one of the company's bateaux, which had been poled up from the deeper reaches of the river.

MacIvor discarded a coat of buffalo hide, which covered a jacket of deerskin. He kicked the snow from his leggings and stretched himself to his full height, looking down sardonically at the slender figure of the post clerk.

The coffee boiled over. MacIvor snatched it from the coals and set it on the table, his nostrils widening under the pleasing influence of the long-absent aroma.

"I've been living with these Assiniboines so long that I could kill my own mother for coffee, Frenchy," said the trapper. "It's no life for a white man, Antoine, when he's been used to better things. Take me, now. Here I was in charge of this comfortable post, and then the damned company throws me out, with winter setting in and small chance of a man fighting his way down the river through the snow. It was lucky for me that I had turned a trick or two for old Gauché, and he could give me a corner of a lodge in return. But it's no way to treat a white man, not at all, Frenchy. Some day I'll have a reckoning with the company."

There was ice in the Scot's voice, and his brows were contracted moodily. He shoved away the plateful of meat which Antoine had put on the table.

"More of the company's impertinence!" snarled MacIvor in sudden rage. "Jerked meat! Here I pay a friendly call at the post I once ran, and the best I can get to eat is the fare I've sickened of in Gauché's camp."

Antoine hastened to explain that the men had gone to the fort for supplies.

"Then bring me some of the company's whisky," demanded MacIvor. "Not the watered stuff you trade for pelts, but the best you have; the kind that's meat and drink to a real man, Frenchy. Or, better, I'll go and get it myself, and then I'll know that I have plenty."

MacIvor knew where the liquor was kept. He departed in quest of it. Antoine followed with the keys, cursing the fate which had sent this man in the wake of the storm. The errand took several minutes, as the store room in which the liquor was kept was at the far end of the compound. When they returned, MacIvor filled a coffee cup with whisky and tossed it off.

"AND now," said MacIvor, standing in front of the fireplace, "what of the squaw who came here last night? She must go back to the Assiniboines, little Antoine."

The clerk's face showed his dismay. He had been hoping against hope that MacIvor was not following those moccasin tracks but had merely come to the trading post for whisky and a supply of coffee. But now it was apparent that the trapper's silence with regard to the Crow woman had been purposeful. Behind the veil of his seeming indifference, he had been watching. One thing was certain, there was no use pretending that the Crow woman was not at the post.

"I don't know where she is," said Antoine, sullenly.

MacIvor laughed harshly.

"I thought better of you, Frenchy," he said. "Next you'll be telling me that there is no squaw here. I've followed her tracks in the snow for two days. She's a Crow woman, judging by the moccasin stitchings, and I'll swear she's one I've seen in old Gauché's camp. You'd best bring her forth, Antoine. If Gauché himself comes for her—well, that old wolf will not be as kind and considerate toward you as I have been."

"I tell you I don' know where she is," persisted Antoine. "She come las' night, on the way to her own people. Why not let her go back to the Crows, MacIvor? She has not harm' you. Give the poor devil her one leettle chance."

Again MacIvor laughed.

"Always an eye to the main chance, Frenchy," he said. "Plenty of pelts from the grateful Crows if you return this squaw to them. But I have a debt or two to pay the Assiniboines, and back she goes to old Gauché's camp. Probably he'll brew some new kind of poison for her. A genius at that sort of thing is old Gauché. Stir yourself, Antoine. We must start back soon."

Antoine's glance fell on the rack of arms.

Once more MacIvor's laugh filled the room with its metallic tones.

"Oh, the gallant Frenchman!" exclaimed the trapper. "He would fight for this Crow woman. Well, my brave mouse, we must see that you do not hurt yourself with these weapons you know so little about."

Striding to the rack of guns, MacIvor took them up, one by one, and, with lightning-like rapidity, discharged them into the ceiling. At the first flash and roar, Antoine staggered against the stone fireplace. He coughed violently in the sulphurous fumes that soon filled the room, and MacIvor shouted with laughter at each spasm that shook the slender form of the clerk.

The last gun made a terriffic roar as it was discharged, and MacIvor, with the plainsman's regard for anything unusual in the way of firearms, examined it carefully before he flung it on the table with the rest.

"There's a sweet weapon, Antoine," he said. "A buffalo gun of the right bore.

Most of them are too great, and it's my theory that they lose just so much in penetrating power. But that gun would drive a bullet through the heart of the mightiest buffalo on the plains. A fine weapon, Antoine. I may take it with me when I go."

"Take it an' welcome, MacIvor," gasped the clerk. "She is yours now, that gun, by Gar!"

MacIvor's laugh seemed to shake the room, which had scarce done trembling from the fusillade.

"You think to get rid of me too soon, Frenchy," he said. "I take more with me than that buffalo gun when I go. And, by the way, Antoine, what have you to add to this little collection on the table? A popgun, or it may be a knife?"

The baleful eyes of the trapper surveyed Antoine through the curling wisps of smoke. In the midst of the choking haze, MacIvor seemed larger and more terrifying than ever. The clerk fumbled at the belt beneath his jacket of deerskin and brought forth a long, keen-bladed knife, which he handed to the trapper.

MacIvor spun the knife to the ceiling and dexterously caught it by the handle as it descended. With a flick of his iron fingers, he tossed it atop the table where it stuck, quivering, its point buried deeply in the pine plank.

"A dangerous plaything for a little man like you, Antoine," said MacIvor. "We'll leave it there till I have done my errand. Where is the Crow woman, Frenchy? Bring her from hiding, little mouse, and then I'll be gone with her as a present to old Gauché—though not till I've had more of a skinful of whisky."

"I swear, MacIvor," gasped Antoine, "I don' know where she may be. She was here when I got to the bastion and see you coming. But now she is gone, by Gar! You know the post so well as I, MacIvor. Suppose you hunt her out."

MacIvor knew that he was getting the truth. The clerk leaned back against the fireplace, his knees sagging from sheer terror. At the sight a grim smile of satisfaction flitted across MacIvor's features. He had never driven the manhood more completely out of a victim. It was a tribute to the fear in which he, MacIvor, was held along the Upper Missouri. The clerk's hand clutched at his throat. His words came slowly, like those of a dying man, and his pallid face was contorted from the dread that consumed him like flame.

"Faith, 'twould be a long task to make a man of you, Antoine," growled MacIvor. "Your heart is water and your spine is that of a chipmunk." Then he raised his great voice, and, in the Crow tongue, called:

"Crow woman, where are you? Come forth, or when I take you to old Gauché he will not know you for the beating you have had."

There was a momentary silence, broken only by Antoine's sobs as he struggled for breath. Then came a woman's voice:

"I am here. Come and get me."

THE voice came from the heavily curtained bunk at the end of the room. The Crow woman's words sounded muffled as they penetrated the thick hangings.

MacIvor stared at the bunk a moment and then gave an exclamation of satisfaction.

"*Bot-sots!* (good)," he said in Crow. "Well spoken, oh Crow woman. I'll take you at your word, and you can lead me over the back trail to old Gauché."

MacIvor strode through the smoke-filled room. In order to reach the bunk, it was necessary for him to step on the empty sacking which he had kicked aside from the fireplace. As he did so, there was a muffled click of steel, followed by a curse of rage and pain from MacIvor.

The great bear trap had been moved from the far corner of the room. Its jaws had been opened, and the trap had been cunningly concealed beneath the sacking, while MacIvor and Antoine had been getting the whisky. Its sharp teeth had caught MacIvor just above the ankle. The trapper tore away the sacking and exposed the steel. The heavy chain had been fastened to a log in the flooring beneath the bunk.

MacIvor lost no time in bending to the task of opening the steel jaws with his hands. But the trap was made to hold a grizzly bear. In opening it, the Crow woman had used a rifle barrel as a lever, and it had been all she could do, even with such an aid, to depress the powerful spring. Yet such was MacIvor's strength that the great spring bent slowly downward and the jagged semi-circles of steel parted slightly. His foot wormed upward an inch—two inches.

From some source which Antoine would

have been the last in the world to suspect of existing, the clerk was feeling the surge of a new sensation. His fear of MacIvor vanished, and a great determination displaced all else in his mind—determination that MacIvor must not escape. Antoine seized the buffalo gun, and, with hands suddenly steadied, began to load it.

MacIvor, no longer able to hold the steel jaws apart, again felt that terrible clutch on his ankle.

"That's right, Frenchy," he said, looking up and mistaking Antoine's intentions. "Bring that buffalo gun here and we'll press this spring down and get these jaws apart. Then we can settle with the Crow squaw who has played this trick."

But Antoine had no intention of obeying. He was reveling in this new sensation which exalted him more than wine.

"MacIvor," he said, "in one leetle minute this buffalo gun she will be load'. Then she will be buffalo gun no more, for she will have kill' the greatest wil' beast on the plains—the beast which is you, MacIvor."

Rage and incredulity struggled for the mastery in MacIvor's face. Forgetful of the trap and chain, he leaped at the clerk's throat. But he was only brought to the floor with a crash. Struggling to his feet, MacIvor again stooped over the trap. With his powerful hands he began to push downward on the steel spring which held those jaws together.

The clerk went feverishly on with his loading. It was to be a race, and the man who lost was to die. But there was no terror in Antoine's face as he saw MacIvor's straining shoulders sink inch by inch, indicating that the spring was yielding. There was only regret in Antoine's mind that he had not learned more of firearms on this wild frontier. If he only knew how to load faster.

Something like a shadow seemed to flit between the clerk and MacIvor. It was the Crow woman, who had slipped from the curtained bunk and darted toward Antoine's knife, the point of which was still buried in the table.

As the Crow woman snatched up the knife, the sixth sense which seems to be given to those who live in the open told MacIvor that something was wrong. He raised his head and released his hold on the trap, and the great jaws again closed on his leg. But, before he could get on his feet, the Crow woman had flung herself upon him and the long blade had sunk in his back.

MacIvor toppled forward, upon his face. His leg, weighted down with its load of clutching steel, was bent grotesquely beneath him. Antoine, forgetting his business of loading the buffalo gun, stared at the prostrate figure, expecting to see MacIvor's great bulk heave upward again. But the trapper did not move. A red spot on his deerskin jacket grew steadily larger. The Crow woman, silent and crouching, was ready to strike again if need be. With MacIvor's voice so suddenly hushed, the snapping of the fire and the rattle of snow against the windows sounded painfully loud.

"By Gar!" breathed Antoine at last. "MacIvor, of all men, done in by a woman."

The Crow woman straightened up and tossed the knife to the table.

"Gauché lose good frien'," she said, "but he no trouble you dead."

Swiftly she ran outside, and Antoine thought she had gone to her people. It had begun to crowd in upon the clerk that he would have to pay for all this, that Gauché would demand his life in payment for MacIvor's. The trapper would be found at the trading post, slain by Antoine's knife. How could it be explained to the Assiniboines, who were always thirsting for the blood of white men? But, strange to say, these questions troubled Antoine not at all.

Then the Crow woman returned. She had brought up one of the fur company's sleds, used for hauling provisions. She took MacIvor by the shoulders and nodded to Antoine to take the dead man's feet. They half-lifted, half-dragged the great bulk to the sled. Antoine brought out MacIvor's weapons and the coat of buffalo hide, and the hateful headdress. Tied on top of MacIvor's body, the head of the lynx seemed to take on new malevolence.

Putting the sled rope over her shoulder, the Crow woman, with surprising strength, dragged her burden to the gate. Antoine followed and lowered the great bar, wringing a protest from the frosty hinges as he swung the gate open.

Half-way through the gate, the woman paused.

"Good-by," she said. "You good man. The Crow people will not forget. And the wolves, they will have MacIvor tonight."

Antoine's voice sounded strange to his

own ears as he said good-by. Then the Crow woman went on through the gate, the sled slipping along easily behind her on the crusted snow. Could it be possible that the mighty MacIvor would follow anyone so quietly, even in death?

Closing the gate, Antoine climbed the bastion once more. This time he looked long toward the Crow country. The woman was struggling bravely forward with her burdened sled. Her figure dwindled until, even through the field glass, it could be descried no longer. The wind from the distant foothills was cold and heavy. It smelled of new snow. All tracks would be covered before another morning.

Antoine roused himself as if from sleep and slowly descended from the bastion. Then he opened up the great room and aired out the last of the powder smoke and removed a red stain from the floor.

With more interest than he had ever before displayed in firearms, Antoine reloaded every piece from the rack. He weighed each weapon, as he had seen MacIvor do, and sighted along the barrel. Then he propped the buffalo gun in the corner of the fireplace at his side and sat down and smoked and dreamed. But his dreams were not of a high stool and a desk at Fort Union. He would stay on at this post in the very heart of a savage world. He would learn to trap and to shoot, and if there chanced to be fighting—well, so be it.

And somewhere a woman stumbled on through the snow, unaware of the flame of courage she had lighted in the soul of a trading post clerk.

An Ingenious Novelette of a Well Planned Robbery in a New England Town

Parmley's REWARD

By FREDERICK MOORE

WITH sudden and insistent clamor, the wall-telephone in the office of Deputy Sheriff Parmley burst into life, three-one, three-one, three-one.

It was early in the evening, Parmley sat with his feet on the circular railing of his ruddy cannonball stove. The weather had turned sharply cold in the past week and winter had struck Cheltenham from the Canadian border without any warning of snow or gradual lowering of temperature.

Parmley fairly leaped for the telephone. "All right, Annie," he said into the mouthpiece to the girl at the village central office, "This is Ed Parmley—put 'em on the wire."

"It's Jim Stannard, at Waynboro, and he wants to talk to you—he's in a hurry, 'cause he says his train's just pulling out," and without further discussion there came clicks over the wire. Waynboro was the end of the railroad to the south for local trains, and Jim Stannard was a brakeman on the local passenger train due in Cheltenham in about two hours.

Stannard's voice came next. "Hello, Ed—you on the wire?"

"Yes, Jim. What's going on?"

"I wish you'd send word over to my wife that I'm goin' through to Shirley Junction tonight on the Peanut—I'm makin' an extra run, on account of the regular brakeman swingin' with me. That'll give me two days off to once, to go pa'tridge huntin'. I'll be home in the mornin' from the Junction."

"All right, Jim, I'll attend to it."

"She'll be worried tonight if I don't come home off the Peanut, but I'm goin' through, so tell her everything's all right."

"All right, Jim. I'll fix it."

Stannard hung up without further ado, and it was apparent that he had left the Waynboro depot abruptly to board his train, known from old days as "The Peanut" because it carried only one passenger car and a combination baggage and express car, with mail.

"Annie, did you hear what Jim said?" asked Parmley into the mouthpiece.

"Yes, I heard it all."

"Well, I got to leave right away for Tinleyville in my car. Wish you'd call up Tom Hill and ask him to send Charlie over to Stannard's house and tell Mrs. Stannard he won't be home till he comes down from the Junction on the four o'clock in the morning—and not to worry."

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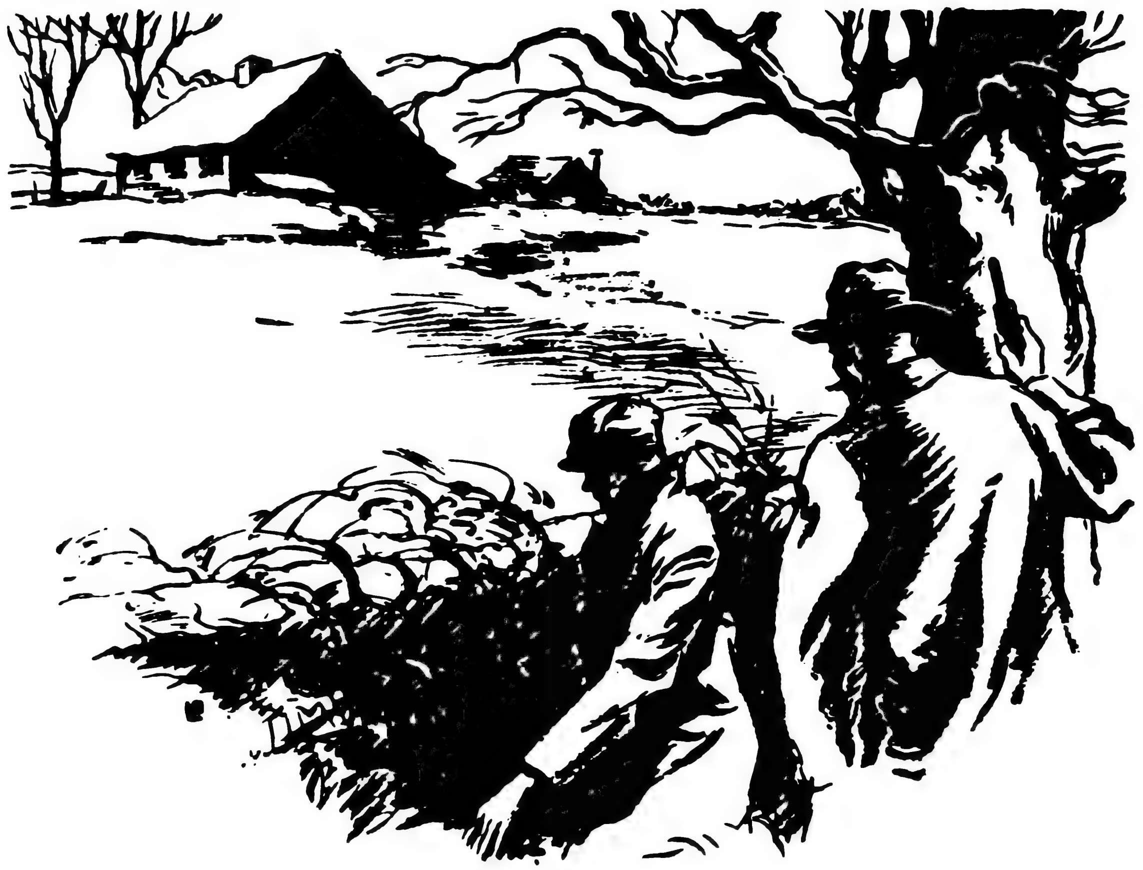


"All right—Sheriff," and there was a sly giggle over the wire. Parmley was a young man and he had been sheriff only about a month, and the youths and maidens of Cheltenham had not yet ceased to tease him about his official position. Cheltenham never before had a deputy sheriff, and High Sheriff Hibbard of the county had appointed Parmley because the young man knew all the farmers for miles around, on account of the fact that he was agent for farm machinery, fertilizer and such things as could be sold to a thriving agricultural district; also, there was an election coming in the next few months, and Sheriff Hibbard would be on the county ticket to succeed himself. Parmley would make a good vote-getter. He had been in Cheltenham five years and had made many friends, but little money.

Nobody knew much about Parmley, except that he had come from "down country," a vague term covering the territory from Cheltenham to Boston. But he was not a city man, having worked as farm hand and insurance agent and lumberman—with a little railroading as a freight brakeman. He was about thirty, tall, gaunt, square-jawed, with blue eyes and yellowish hair and a wise smile. Secretly, he regarded the inhabitants of the little town of Cheltenham as hicks, but he mixed with them on the basis of knowing no more than they did of the outside world, for he prided himself on his shrewdness.

As he turned from the telephone to the stove, he glanced at the clock on his desk. It was a few minutes after seven, and dark outside, with a gusty wind that rattled the windows.

"That gives me about two hours," he mused. His eyes were sparkling with a peculiar light, his movements and manner had suddenly become furtive. "Everything's all right," he went on in a whisper, repeating the words. "It's up to Jim, now—I'm all set, or will be, by the time the Peanut comes through."

He looked out of the window down the main street, with its porched stores and deserted sidewalks. Cheltenham was at supper. It was a good time to make his start, for the less Cheltenham saw, the better. From now on Parmley knew that every move he made must be masked behind some perfectly normal transaction which in no way could be suspected of a double purpose. Such things as he did which could not be observed by any chance, would have to be performed with infinite cunning, for he was known for miles around.

"Lucky it's such a dark night," he said. "And the lake's frozen hard enough to be safe and I'd say that five or six folks heard Jim 'phone me, so that's safe enough. If they will listen in on party lines, the thing to do is give 'em an earful. All I hope is that Jim knows what he's talking about and that the side door's open when the Peanut passes the Point."

He took a heavy corduroy cap from the wall, where it hung on a hook among posters bearing the pictures of notorious criminals wanted by the police of various cities. These posters were kept in constant sight by Parmley, so as to fasten the faces in his memory. He hoped some day to capture a man and collect a fat reward. Cheltenham, between Boston and Canada, was one of the main roads for fugitives attempting to escape from the south with automobiles, and collecting a reward had become the chief ambition of the new deputy sheriff.

HE HAD a back room that overlooked the river and the railroad. It stuck out over a sharp slope in the ground, and was built on a stone foundation, which served also as the walls for his garage under the floor. He lived alone, slept and prepared his meals there. Now he took the lamp and went to the cupboard where he kept his food. Carefully, he put on gloves, and cut the rind off a big piece of cheese. He unwrapped a slab of bacon and cut two thin slices of the meat. He gathered up some crusts of bread, and put the cheese-rind, the bacon, and the bread in a paper bag, rolled the bag into a small parcel, and stuffed it into the side pocket of his overcoat. The paper bag he had saved especially for this parcel—a bag he had brought months before from a grocery store in Waynboro Junction, with the name of the grocer printed on it. Parmley had laid his plans carefully over a long period of time.

"That's bait enough," he remarked thoughtfully, as he went back to the office, leaving the lamp in his living room on the kitchen table. He turned to the wall telephone, and turned the crank.

"Hello, Annie. This is Ed Parmley—I want to talk to Landon, over across from Beaver Point."

Parmley could hear the dull buzzing of Landon's telephone, and clicks from along the line which betrayed the fact that again there were to be listeners to the conversation. Parmley grinned, that was exactly what he wanted. It was easy enough to establish the fact that he had business at the Landon farm.

"W'al, what's wanted?" came the voice of Landon. He had evidently risen from the supper table, and had food in his mouth.

"This is Ed Parmley. I'm going over to Tinsleyville, down at the end of the lake, to pick up a tire I forgot at Liggitt's place last week, and I thought as long as I was going by your place, I'd see if I could buy some of them russet pears I hear you've got for sale—they keep pretty well through the winter, don't they?"

"Why, hello, Ed! Yes, they're the best keepers I know—you'll find 'em a little hard for eatin' pears at first. I'll guess I can let you have some. How many you want?"

"Oh, about a bushel."

"Yes, I can let ye have a bushel. What time you expect to be along?"

"I'm going right over now."

"All right—I'll have 'em up from the cellar," and Landon hung up his receiver.

"Killed two birds with one stone that time," Parmley remarked to himself. "Shows I'm going to Tinsleyville on business, and that I'm going to be opposite Beaver Point. That's all above board to suit anybody, and I guess about three families know all about it."

The tire at Liggitt's store in the hamlet of Tinsleyville was also a careful preparation for the night's work, for Parmley had purposely driven away without his spare tire a week before.

Parmley put on his overcoat, tied a muffler around his neck, turned down the lamp in the kitchen and blew it out. He locked the office and went down the slope to the back of the building to the entrance of the garage. Inside, he took a pair of iron strips with straps on them and dropped them into his overcoat pocket; ice-creepers, with sharp points on their edges, to enable a person to walk safely over slippery ice.

He got the car out, and cranked it up. The night was cold with a sharp wind rising, and whipping down the hill that overhung the town. The rawness of the weather suited him, for no one would be likely to be lurking along lonely roads on such a night. And there would be no moon before midnight. He made good time down the main street, headed for the lake, about half a mile away.

The lake lay in a long valley. On the road which Parmley followed, a log bridge some two hundred yards long crossed at a narrow spot between the two shores. He passed under the railroad just before he reached the log bridge, and the next station on that railroad was the tiny place known as Tinsleyville, at the far end of the lake, about two miles distant.

The railroad did not cross the lake, but skirted the north shore to Tinsleyville. At the far end of the log bridge, Parmley struck the road which followed the south shore of the lake, and the log bridge brought him to the crossroads. To the right was Landon's farm, and beyond, Tinsleyville station. About opposite the private road which led off the main road to Landon's, there was a point jutting into the lake from the railroad side, forming the narrowest part of the lake. The point was known as Beaver Point, and the narrow strip of water, which really joined two lakes, was known as the Narrows. It was less than a hundred yards from shore to shore at Beaver Point.

Parmley turned his car to the right, and ran along the road to Tinsleyville. The lake was only ten or fifteen feet below him, with high banks covered with trees and brush. From the road rose a wooded hill, a great place for hunters. The lake was frozen over with smooth ice, an inch or two thick.

Stopping at Landon's gate to open it, Parmley stood listening a few minutes. Hunters might be on their belated way home at this time of the evening. Partridges were plentiful in the hills, and Parmley was a little fearful that later in the evening he might encounter some of his friends. The hunters might have dogs with them, and he did not want to be discovered hiding in the bushes alongside the road, away from his car. It might be awkward under the circumstances.

"I guess it's too late to run into anybody," he told himself, "or it will be by the time the Peanut goes by. I'll have to kill a little time, and take this bag of cheese to the Burnham place before I go to Tinsleyville."

He drove the car up the private road to Landon's house, leaving the gate open for his return. A flood of light broke into the darkness as Landon opened his door when he saw the approaching car lights.

"Come in, Ed, and have a glass of cider," hailed Landon.

"Can't stop," said Parmley. "Make it another time. I want to be in Tinsleyville before the Peanut gets in." This was another detail in Parmley's careful preparation. He wanted to establish the fact that he would be in Tinsleyville when the Peanut arrived, though that would not be the fact. He had particular reasons for implanting this misleading information into Landon's mind.

"W'al, now, I thought you'd be able to come in for a minute, anyhow," insisted the hospitable Landon. He shut the door after him and came out on the dark porch. "Just set your pears out here, thinkin' you might be in a hurry." He came down the steps with the creaking basket, a vague form in the light from the curtained windows.

Parmley left his engine running to make good his pretense of haste, and slowly swung the car for the back track.

"How much be they?" he asked, as he came alongside Landon.

"Been askin' a dollar. You can have 'em for that. They're little small this year, somehow. These come from the orchard up back of the Burnham place."

"All right. Can I settle the next time I see you over at the postoffice?"

"Oh, shucks! You pay me when you git ready! I guess I can trust the deputy sheriff." He laughed quietly, and turned to lift the basket from the ground.

"Seen anybody up on the mountain after pa'tridges?"

"No, I ain't seen anybody huntin' for a week and I ain't heard a shot. Somebody was up the old sled road a week ago Friday, blazin' away, but I guess they was shootin' at a mark."

"Put 'em in the back seat," directed Parmley. "The basket'll fit on the floor, and there's a robe to cover 'em. They may freeze, it's a nippin' night, and I don't want to keep you out in the cold."

"Yes, it got cold quick," said Landers as he stowed the basket. Then with a hasty "Good night" the farmer went up the steps and disappeared into the house.

PARMLEY drove down the private road to the gate. He was a trifle annoyed. Landon's remark about trusting the sheriff had annoyed him. Yet he knew it for the joking of a friend, and there was really nothing to be annoyed about; still, it seemed strange to Parmley that the idea of honesty should enter the mind of Landon at that particular time. Parmley got some comfort out of the thought that the whole project in hand was based on the trust of the community in the honesty of the new deputy sheriff, and that Landon, after all, had revealed a good omen for the success of the venture of the night.

He ran through and closed the gate. Then he doused his lights and ran back about half the distance to the log bridge. As this was going in the direction away from Tinsleyville, he was afraid that Landon might notice that the deputy sheriff had failed to go to Tinsleyville for the tire.

Running the car into a lane that led off the road to an empty house—the Burnham place—Parmley left the car and went to the deserted building. He felt his way in the darkness to the tiny porch over the front door. He knew that there were panes broken out of the windows. He located one of these holes in a sash and tossed his paper bag containing the scraps of food into a room. Then he hurried back to his car.

Going down to the road, he made sure that there was no lights or sounds to indicate that anybody was coming in a car from either direction. He backed the car into the road and again headed in the direction of Landon's. At Landon's gate, he turned on his lights, and ran around a bend toward Tinsleyville. There he stopped and turned off his lights, knowing that he was not visible at that spot from Landon's farmhouse. He swung the car into a sled road which led up from the shore of the lake, and almost parallel with it. It was up this road that Landon hauled his supply of ice every winter. The car was hidden now by the brush between road and lake, and Parmley got out.

He worked his way down to the lake, a distance of fifty feet by the sled road, due to the fact that it did not go straight down the bank, but lessened the slope by following the contour of the ground. He gained the ice and strapped on his creepers. The ice was smooth as glass, but the iron creepers gave him sure footing. The wind from down the lake assailed him in biting gusts, and he turned his muffler up over his head so that the corduroy cap was held in place, and his ears protected.

He waited patiently for about half an hour, and then heard the Peanut whistling into Cheltenham depot. Then he started across the Narrows to Beaver Point, that sandy and sparsely wooded neck of land. There were no houses on that side of the lake for a distance of half a mile in each direction. Only a tramp or section-walker could be expected in the neighborhood on such a night. To his left he could see the lights in the farmhouses on the hills above Tinsleyville depot.

By the time he reached the opposite shore, Parmley heard the rumble of the rails above him, presaging the coming of the train. He swung to the left of the Point, on the Tinsleyville side, and made for the rough stone embankment which carried the track there along the shore. The railroad was twenty feet above him now, and the stone fill of the embankment sloped steeply to the edge of the ice. He knew that the light from the engine would not hit him as he crouched against the embankment, for there was a cut with high ground on each side side where the railroad cut off the Point and cut through it. It was also a curve, and the engine would just be heading on a straight line for a quarter of a mile, before it swung lakeward again toward Tinsleyville. Parmley was too low to be revealed to any of the passengers by beams of light from the car windows. It was the ideal spot for the work in hand.

He heard the exhaust of the engine and the increasing rumble of the rails. The engine wheels shrieked against the cold metal as the flanges ground round the sharp curve. Parmley, glancing up, caught a yellowish light on the side of the train—the door of the combination baggage and express car was open. Old Hovey, the baggagemaster, always waved to his wife from that side door as he passed through Cheltenham, and the door was frequently left open on the way to Tinsleyville.

Parmley's breath came now in quick gasps, and he crouched close against the rocky embankment, every nerve in his body on the alert.

"Will Jim Stannard have the chance, or the nerve, to put it over?" Parmley asked himself.

There was a deluge of light against the black sky, a roar, and needles of brilliance shot out from the windows of the cars overhead. Cinders showered down upon Parmley and there was the thud of a heavy, but soft, object against the stones of the embankment. Then something went skittering over the ice near where Parmley stood, a scraping, cutting sound against the ice.

Parmley's heart leaped at the sounds, for he knew them to be made by lock, and chain, and steel loops securing the mouth of a heavy leathern bag. It had shot from the side door of the express car, its delivery timed to perfection. Only Jim Stannard, the brakeman, could have gauged things so well—he had practically handed the leathern bag to Parmley.

The train shot away, and for an instant was invisible to Parmley, being so high above the level of the lake. But as it swung inward again, on that sharp turn to Tinsleyville at the end of the lake, he saw the illuminated rectangle of the open door of the last car. At the same time, the engine headlight was blasting a great cone of light into the darkness ahead and the whistle barked its warning to Tinsleyville.

Long quivering glints of light came flickering over the ice from the train, now broadside on. In a momentary flash that swept the surface of the ice, Parmley had a glimpse of a black pile silhouetted for an instant. He had its bearings now, and started for it. By the time he had laid his mittened hands on the precious bag, he could hear the grinding of the brakes as the train stopped at Tinsleyville.

"We hit it right that time!" exulted the deputy sheriff. "Old Jim Stannard sure come through like clockwork!"

SHOULDERING the heavy bag, he started at an angle which would bring him to the old sled road across the Narrows. The lights from Landon's house, up beyond the main road, were beacons for direction. He swung along at a good pace, the creepers grinding with each step. Now the train was pulling out from Tinsleyville, and its wheezing and grinding helped to cover the sound of his footfalls.

He located the entrance to the sled road, and stopped a minute to listen. There were no motors on the road, he knew that for certain, for he had watched it closely in both directions as he crossed the Narrows. But there might be somebody afoot, or Landon might be down to his lower barn near the main road, and possibly would hear the car starting up. But Parmley heard nothing suspicious.

Arriving at the car, Parmley threw down the bag. It seemed to be full of paper packets, bonds and so on, and probably packets of currency. He lifted out the basket of pears, put the bag in, and placed the basket on top, after covering the bag with the robe. Without turning on his lights, he backed into the main road, and after listening again, started the car for Tinsleyville, turning on the lights when he was under way.

He made the mile to the railroad crossing, passed through the covered bridge, rolled up the slope to Liggitt's store, and swung his car so that when he came down past the filling station, he could say that he had just come from Tinsleyville station, a stone's throw away. The depot was closed for the night now, and Liggitt's store was in darkness.

Parmley drove up to the filling station, just below Liggitt's, and blew his horn. Liggitt lived in a house that was behind the store, and presently a door slammed, and a voice which Parmley recognized as Liggitt's, called from the darkness. "Who is it?"

"Ed Parmley. Didn't I forget a tire here last week?"

"I dunno but what you did, Ed." Liggitt was coming down the path between house and store to the shed which served as a filling station. He was rattling his keys, and he came to a stop in front of Parmley's headlights to find the key for the shed.

"I couldn't be sure who left that tire," said Liggitt, as he opened the door. "But I remembered you took it off to fix the strap last week when you stopped for gas, and then drove off. You certainly was in a hurry that night."

Liggitt came out with the tire.

"Just throw it on the back seat. Hate to bother you this time of night, but I was just over to Landon's buying some pears, and being so near, I thought I'd pick the tire up. Besides, I wanted to see somebody on the Peanut, but it pulled out too quick for me—just as I was up on the hill here."

Parmley swung his car toward the covered bridge, but was in no haste to move away. He fiddled with the wheel.

"This cold snap holds on strong, don't it," remarked the storekeeper.

"Yes, it does. Thought I saw Ev Johnson get off the back end of the Peanut as it pulled out."

"No, 't'wa'nt Ev," said Liggitt. "Ev's been laid up with the rheumatiz some days, ain't been out of the house for a week. This cold spell kind of kinked him up again."

"Hard luck for Ev—but that's kind of funny."

"What's funny?"

"I could ha' swore it was Ev jumped off the tail end of the train. I expected he'd come up to the road here, but he just turned and footed it down the track."

"Well, Ev ain't walkin' around nor jumpin' off trains, neither," declared Liggitt. He swung his arms violently and thrashed his sides to keep warm, for the chilling wind up the lake was sweeping freely on that hillside, and Liggitt had not come out with any intention of standing and talking. Still, he did not want to walk away from the deputy sheriff.

"I wonder who the dickens that was," said Parmley, in a musing tone. It was natural enough for a deputy sheriff to want to know the identity of anybody who jumped off the tail end of trains in the dark and disappeared in a sneaking manner. "More I think of it, funnier it seems," persisted Parmley.

"Oh, I guess you saw one of Newcomb's hired men. One of 'em's been down country a couple of days—somebody dead or somethin'. He'd go down the track a little ways, and cut over through the pines to the high road. It's shorter that way."

"Guess maybe you're right," assented Parmley, with sudden satisfaction. "He was a rough lookin' kind of customer, now that I think of it. I saw him pass the switch light just for a flash."

Liggitt turned away. "Good night, Ed," he said.

"Good night, and much obliged," said Parmley, and stepped on the gas.

The car made fairly good speed on the return trip to Landon's gate. There Parmley slowed down, and proceeded at moderate speed to a point where he was opposite the empty Burnham house. Once more he killed his lights, rolled the car up into the dark lane, and lifted the leather bag from under the basket of pears.

He worked rapidly now. In a minute he had reached the door of the "rollway" to the cellar at the side of the house. He pulled up the door and descended the stone stairway in utter darkness. He took a flashlight from his pocket, and threw a beam of light over the cellar, revealing the whitewashed walls. There was a pile of trash in one corner far in, with coils of old chicken wire, bean poles, and a lot of window blinds standing on edge against a wall. The blinds were leaned slightly away from the wall, so that the one nearest the stones had a space about a foot wide from the wall at the floor.

Parmley crossed the cellar and shoved the leathern bag in the open space between wall and blinds. He used an old mop handle to drive the bag well out of sight. Then he shut off his light, got up the stone stairs and closed the rollway door down again. He hastened and got his car into the road, turned on his lights, and stepped out to lift the hood over the engine.

"What you doing there!" called Parmley sharply into the darkness.

As he expected there was no answer to his challenge. He was simply taking the precaution of making sure that no one was about by any chance. He reasoned that a challenge would bring an answer, or the sound of running feet.

"You'll have to go about a mile before you come to the Center," called Parmley. This was another precaution. If his words were heard and understood, he would be able to prove that he had directed a man to Cheltenham Center, beyond the crossroads, at that particular time of night. It was another step in the direction of safety for himself when he came to review his actions, real and imaginary, for that evening. Parmley had thought it all out with infinite care.

He climbed into his car and crossed the log bridge, bound now back to Cheltenham. In fifteen minutes he was at the door of his garage.

"I've had the best of luck," he told himself.

He went round to the front and entered his office, to pass to his bedroom and kitchen without lighting the lamp. The stove was glowing with its coal fire, and Parmley undressed and went to bed, well pleased with the night's work.

II

IT WAS midnight when Parmley was aroused by the roar of an automobile engine just being shut off outside the door of his office and the voice of High Sheriff Hibbard, giving instructions to his driver. The car whirled away, and there was a pounding at the front door.

Parmley bounded out of bed and pulled on some clothes. Then he lit the lamp, and went to the door.

"Hello, Sheriff—what's up?" asked the deputy, as he stepped aside for his chief.

"We've got a job on our hands—a big one," said Hibbard. He was a big man with a heavy round face, weatherbeaten and lined with wrinkles, and a fatherly, quiet way about him. He threw off his fur-lined coat and fur cap, and walked to the stove, which still glowed with a dull redness and threw off an agreeable heat.

"What's the trouble?" asked Parmley, buttoning his shirt and pulling on a waistcoat. "Must be something pretty big to pull you out of the Junction this time of night."

Hibbard turned his back to the stove and stood with his legs wide apart. He wore a brown checked suit, well pressed, a low collar and a blue tie, and his gold watch chain twinkled in the lamplight as he threw his coat open. His forehead was ruffled with worry, and his graying hair was rumpled and stood up stiffly.

"The Peanut's been robbed," said Hibbard.

Parmley gasped and stared at the sheriff. "You mean it's been held up?"

"No, but a bag of bonds and other stuff for the Junction bank from Boston—worth something over a hundred thousand dollars—has disappeared from the express car between Cheltenham and Tinsleyville."

"Well, that is somethin'!" Parmley whistled, and he looked as amazed as all his powers of acting made possible. "That puts it in my district, don't it?"

"You've got a chance to show what you can do, Ed," said Hibbard.

Parmley stooped and shook down the ashes of the grate and opened the damper of the stovepipe. He dumped in more coal, while Hibbard remained standing, staring at the lamp, in deep thought.

"You better listen pretty careful to these details," said Hibbard presently.

Parmley pulled his chair up to the desk and took a pad and pencil. "All right, I better make a note or two."

"We been questioning the whole train crew. I've wired the express company in Boston, and detectives are leaving at once—they'll be here on the nine train tomorrow. But we got to see what we can do in the meantime, such as a general alarm for strangers. I've set things going from my office over the telephone."

"Got any ideas, chief?"

"Not yet. The bank's offered a reward of five thousand, and the express company wire offering another five thousand, got in just as I left—that's just for the recovery of the bag. I'd say the valuables are more'n the bank has give out—it'd be bad for 'em to have the loss too high—might make a run on 'em. They say most of the bonds was registered, but others were negotiable, and perhaps there was currency in a pretty good sum in the shipment. The bank's just paid out on loans secured by the bonds, on account of the consolidation going on with the Trust Company branch at the Junction—so this catches 'em at a bad time. Of course, the express company's responsible, and all that, but I guess they want that bag pretty bad and quick. The rewards are for the recovery of the bag, regardless of catching up the thief."

"We can't let any grass grow under our feet," said Parmley.

"You're right there! Better get the section boss out by daylight with a handcar, and comb both sides of the track between here and Tinsleyville. Maybe the bag fell off the train, because the last time the express messenger says he saw it, it was on the floor near the side door, and that was just as he was pulling out of your depot. Hovey, the baggage man, says the side door was shut right after the Peanut pulled out of here, and wasn't opened until Tinsleyville, because he had some stuff for Liggitt's store there. The bag was on a hook, and it fell off or got knocked off and nobody picked it up, because they was getting so near the Junction. The messenger looked for it when they left Tinsleyville, and it was gone. Jim Stannard, the brakeman, come into the car after the train left Tinsleyville, and he swears the bag was in the car after they pulled out of Tinsleyville. In that case, somebody's lying, or the bag was lifted after Tinsleyville, but all agree that the side door of the car was shut then."

"Say, Chief!" and Parmley's voice was raised now to proper excitement. "I was over at Tinsleyville just as the Peanut pulled out—left a spare tire at Liggitt's last week by mistake, and I went over to Landon's farm for some pears, so I run over to Liggitt's to pick up the tire. My car was stopped just up above the depot as the train left, and I saw somebody jump off the tail end of the Peanut—thought it was Ev Johnson."

Hibbard pointed a finger at Parmley and cried, "That's our man! Now we've got something to start with! Go ahead, everything you can remember!"

"There ain't much. I told Liggitt I'd seen Ev get off the train," went on Parmley excitedly, "but Liggitt, he said Ev's been laid up with rheumatism—but I'll bet my hat that's the man who got the bag!"

"Sure it is!" exploded the sheriff. "Where'd he go to?"

"Hurried down the track—coming toward Cheltenham, you know—headed for Beaver Point. That's what made me think it was funny—my lights was out, and it was pretty dark, and I expected Ev'd come up the hill toward Liggitt's. But when he headed down the track, I thought Ev'd cut across lots through the orchard where the old beehives are, 'stead of coming up my way and into the road. But Liggitt, when I spoke to him about seeing Ev, said the man must have been one of Newcomb's hired men that's been down country for a couple of days to a funeral."

"Then your man—if he left the track—headed up for Dry Bridge Road on the hill!"

"I didn't see him leave the track, but maybe he did."

"Have anything with him, bundle or anything?"

"Didn't see any bundle. I just saw him drop off the end of the train, down the steps, and turn and walk back. I got another squint of him as he passed the red switch lamp."

"We got to telephone every farmhouse that's got a 'phone up on Dry Bridge Hill and find out if one of Newcomb's men come in on the Peanut last night. We've wired every depot to keep an eye out for strangers, so he'll have to keep to the hills with his bag, except that he may sleep in barns, or steal grub." And Hibbard turned to the telephone.

"JUST a minute, Chief," said Parmley. "There's another thing—I ain't so sure the man who got off the Peanut's the man we're after."

Hibbard turned back from the telephone. "Why not?" he demanded.

"On my way back from Tinsleyville I picked up a man in the road walking this way, bound for Cheltenham Center, so he said."

"Thunderation!" said the sheriff. "Why didn't you say so?"

"Because I've been thinking up all I could about the man who got off the Peanut."

"All right, but about this man on the road. What did he have to say? You must have talked to him, if you picked him up?" Hibbard was eagerly impatient now, and he waved his hands to Parmley to go on with his story.

"Just as I was close to Landon's gate, you know there's a sharp turn in the road, with high banks on the upper side from the lake, and lots of bushes. Well, I come on him, and near run into him—he was in the middle of the road, and walking towards the crossroads at the log bridge. I stopped and asked him where he was going. He said he was on the way to Cheltenham Center, and had been riding with a man whose car broke down back of Tinsleyville, and he'd walked along by himself. I took him along, as far as the crossroads, and showed him the road to the Center."

"That's the same man that got off the Peanut!" exclaimed Hibbard.

Parmley scratched his head in a puzzled way. It was his purpose now to be a trifle stupid. "How do you make that out, Chief?" he asked.

"I don't make it out—I know it!" said the sheriff with irritation. "Can't you put two and two together?"

"But the man who got off the Peanut maybe was one of Newcomb's men—the man I picked up was on the other side of the lake from the railroad track, and had been in an automobile with somebody who—"

"That's all bosh! He just told you that. Don't be so sure the man off the train was one of Newcomb's. That's a point to be cleared up. You'll never get anywhere if you start in with theories that ball you all up—keep an open mind, Ed, and don't jump to conclusions."

"My mind's open. I ain't got no theories," objected Parmley.

"Yes you have! You're married to the idea that the stranger you saw getting off the train was one of Newcomb's men. You ain't got a thing to go on with that idea, but what Liggitt said when he thought it was one of Newcomb's men."

"But I tell you, Chief, this man I picked up was on the other side of the lake. I was over across the Point then, at Landon's. The man who got off the train couldn't have come on the same road I drove my car on and he was ahead of me, the man I near hit. He couldn't have made it from Tinsleyville ahead of me and be on the track when I saw him heading for the Point."

"You come pretty fast?"

"Yes, I hit a pretty good clip. It was cold, and I had a bushel of pears on my back seat and I was afraid they'd freeze. That man I picked up, if he was the same man who got off the train, would have had to come on a fast horse, and how could he pass me and get ahead?"

"How long after you left Liggitt's was it when you picked up this man on the road?"

"I'd say half an hour, more or less. I stopped to gab with Liggitt a few minutes while he got the tire out of the shed. By that time the train was gone."

Sheriff Hibbard was quiet for a few minutes. He hooked his thumbs into the armholes of his waistcoat, and studied the wall with an intent gaze.

"You say it was half an hour, more or less, from the time the train pulled out of Tinsleyville, and you saw the man back-track down the railroad toward Beaver Point?"

"All of that," said Parmley, well aware of what was in Hibbard's mind.

"Simple enough," declared the sheriff. "If a man was to run down the track from Tinsleyville to Beaver Point, he could make it in fifteen minutes easy. He could cross the Narrows on the ice in ten minutes, and five, climbing the bank from the lake to the road. That gives him time enough to be ahead of you in the road. He was smart enough to get in your way, and be helped along his road."

Parmley grinned in open admiration. "That's pretty clever, Chief, I guess you've got it worked out."

"That's what happened," went on the sheriff. "If the ice is thick enough to cross at Beaver Point I've got it."

"I can't say for sure that a man could cross—lake's frozen pretty hard, but at the Narrows it may not be thick enough for a man to cross. There's a good deal of current at the Narrows, and sometimes it's open to late in the winter."

"You find out about that, first thing in the morning. You'll be down there with the section boss in the handcar. It's a cinch that your man off the train short-cutted you, and then you picked him up and hustled him along."

"But he didn't have a bag or anything," objected Parmley.

"Makes no difference. He maybe hid it in the brush by the road, and came back for it later with a car. We've got to watch that lake shore down that way tomorrow like a hawk; not that he'll come back in daylight, but he'll be around in the neighborhood, and we may pick up a trail."

"I guess you're right," agreed Parmley enthusiastically. "If we find the bag it'll be somewhere along that road. And if we work things clever, we'll likely pick up my stranger."

"Get a good look at him?"

"Nothing to speak of. He didn't make any move to get out of sight, or I'd been suspicious. I supposed at first it was some of the boys I knew from Cheltenham who'd been gunning up back of Landon's. The pa'tridges been pretty thick up back of Landon's this fall."

"Did he ask you for a ride?"

"No. My car come around the bend at a good clip, as I told you. I was almost on him before he knew I was coming, or before I knew anybody was ahead. You know where the alders are so thick at that sharp turn, and he was right in the middle of the road. He had a big stick in his hand, and that's what made me think at first he had a shotgun."

"Did he jump for the bushes? Try to get away, or out of sight?"

"No, not that I noticed. Of course, he jumped for the side of the road, and I threw on the brakes. I run up to him slow, and he stood there and waited for me to come along. He said, 'Stranger, you near got me that time,' and he laughed a little, kind of nervous."

"He was more than a little nervous, you can bank on that," declared Hibbard.

"I said to him, 'I wa'n't looking for anybody out gunnin' this time of night.' And he says, 'I wa'n't gunnin'; I been riding in a car all day, and the man who give me a lift broke down a few miles back and put up for the night with a farmer he knew. I thought I'd come along, feeling the need of a little exercise, and I ain't got so very far to go.' "

"Tell you where he was bound for?"

"Said he was on his way to Cheltenham Center, and that he'd been over there a couple of weeks ago, buying some standin' pulp wood. So you see, Chief, I didn't think there was anything out of the way about him, nothing suspicious, that is. He was a nice spoken man, and it was pretty cold. So I said I could give him a lift as far as the crossroads and he could keep on to the Center. He hopped in the seat with me, 'cause I had my pears in the back. 'Who be ye?' says I to him, and he said his name was Finley or Donley—I didn't catch the name, and didn't bother none to be special particular, he was so kind of aboveboard about everything."

"Then you dropped him at the crossroads, at the log bridge?"

"Yes, right there at the guide post. He asked how far it was to the Center, and I told him about a mile. I told him he might as well come along with me to Cheltenham, and put up at the hotel, but he said he'd boarded a week or so at the Center, and a mile wa'n't nothing to him, when it come to footin' it."

"Say who he'd boarded with?"

"No. He just said he'd lose time in the morning by going to Cheltenham with me. So he got out and thanked me for the ride, and headed along for the Center and I turned and crossed the log bridge and drove along home."

"You bet he didn't want to come to Cheltenham with you," said the sheriff. "And I'll bet he's never been near anybody at the Center, unless he hung around there to plan this robbery."

"We'll have to find out about that Center business," said Parmley, making a note on his pad.

"IT LOOKS to me now," said Hibbard, "as if the whole thing was cooked up in advance. He must have had a tip about that bag from somebody in Boston or at the Junction. You see, the point is this, as far as the express messenger goes, he could handle a package worth up to thirty-five thousand dollars. That was the limit he could be responsible for. And the express company ain't liable beyond that amount. But the registered bonds, and so on, run the amount up for the total to value to somewhere beyond a hundred thousand. The bank's a little cagey on the real value, but it's more'n they admit and this man had a tip on it."

"But how'd he get it out of the baggage car?" asked Parmley.

"Don't know. That's where I'm stumped. Either he threw it off the train himself, or he had somebody sneak into the car and throw it off. Maybe there's two men in it, and your man was in the road just to be picked up and throw us off the track, while the other one headed over the hills in the other direction with the bag. That's where we're complicated up. That man who said he was headed for the Center looks like a herring dragged across the trail. Still and all, we don't want to get married to no theories."

"It was all so kind of natural, that I was taken in. I guess I'm the fool in this case." Parmley ran his fingers through his hair, a rueful look on his face.

"You can't blame yourself none," encouraged the sheriff. "I might have done just what you did myself. We got a slick gang to grapple with, Ed."

"Just the same," went on Parmley, "them Boston detectives will give me the big laugh. To think the deputy sheriff helped the robber along the road!"

"Oh, shucks! Don't cry over spilled milk. What you want to do in the morning is check up on this Center business, and see if there's been any strangers buying pulp wood lately. I'd say that's all a blind, but we can't take chances. You picked up the trail, Ed, and I'd like to see you clean up things in good shape before the detectives are here. You've handed me the first thing on the case I could get my teeth into, and if we catch him you'll get the credit."

"I want to do the best I can."

"We all want to do that—you know I've got an election ahead."

"What's that you said about Stannard claimin' he saw the bag after the Peanut pulled out of Tinsleyville?" Parmley consulted his note.

"Stannard says he saw the bag on the floor of the car after Tinsleyville."

"How does that jibe with my man that got off the train? He couldn't have the sack when he got off, if Stannard saw it after Tinsleyville?"

"Stannard's wrong, that's all. There was a lot of stuff kicking around on the floor of the car, and what Stannard saw may have been mail sacks, or some brown bundles of newspapers."

"But some stranger must have been in that express car—or the baggage end of it," insisted Parmley. "Or maybe the thing was pulled out at a station, by somebody that went past the car door."

Hibbard shook his head. "The mail man, the baggage man, and the express man, all say no stranger was in the car. You know at stations there are too many around the side door for anybody to snatch anything."

"I don't care, they don't want to admit it, but some stranger got into that car. Of course, they don't want to say so, because they'll be blamed."

"I've thought myself they've been kind of hedging on that point myself," said Hibbard. "You know, they're all kind of busy, cleanin' things up as they get near the end of the run. They all want to get home as quick as they can when they pull into the Junction, and that's about all they're thinking of when they get as near as Cheltenham."

"I ought to ask Jim Stannard about a stranger in the car. I know Jim pretty well, and I understand he'll be home in the morning. If I talk to him maybe he'll open up a little on some things that he'd be careful about with you or the detectives."

"You mean you think he's hiding something to keep the men out of trouble? The baggage man and the express messenger?"

"I dunno, Chief. Maybe—nothing wrong on their part, you know, only they may be holding something back that they'd get rapped over the knuckles about, or lose their jobs. Some little thing they know about, but keep in the dark, and that may be the nubbin of this whole case."

"Maybe you're right. Stannard agrees with the baggage man, Hovey, that the door of the express car was shut just after they pulled out of Cheltenham—when Hovey waved to his wife, who was at the window near the track. Stannard shut the door himself, he says, and Hovey backs him up. Stannard shut it with a slam that put a lantern out, hanging from a hook overhead. But it may have slid open afterwards, on one of the sharp curves, you know how them heavy side doors act."

"Maybe the bag never went out through the side door at all," suggested Parmley. "It might have been swiped right out of the car, and dropped from the platform."

"No," said Hibbard. "The smoking car was next to the baggage car. Anybody taking a bag of that size out the end door would have been seen from the smoker, the chance would be too big. Besides, everybody swears that nobody, no passengers, anyhow, went into the baggage car."

"I'll bet the train crew's wrong on that," said Parmley.

"No, I've been over that pretty strong with 'em," objected Hibbard. "Jim Stannard was all het up when he found out what had happened. He and the conductor, Jerry Newton, left the baggage car between Cheltenham and Tinsleyville. Stannard got on the train at Waynboro with a pail of coffee and he finished it, just before Tinsleyville, with what was left of some doughnuts. Now Jerry was with him when he left the car, but Jim seems to feel somebody'll think he stole the bag. Of course, he couldn't pack a big leather bag out of the baggage car with Jerry Newton along with him. That's all bosh, but Jim naturally was worried."

Parmley laughed. "Everybody that knows Jim, knows he wouldn't steal anything; and what could Jim Stannard do with a bag full of bonds? Or anything else, unless cash, and Jim wouldn't know if there was cash in the bag."

"Nobody suspects Jim. Course, he felt pretty blue, to be on the carpet before the bankers and me. He was sore as a goat."

"Pretty hard on Jim, yes. He called me up from Waynboro as the train was pulling out, to tell his wife he was makin' an extra run through to the Junction, and that he'd be back on the morning train. But if he's held at the Junction, I better let his wife know."

"Oh, he can come home. The detectives can find him when they want him, and what good'll it do to hold him. He's got to make his regular train run."

"Then the first thing I've got on my hands in the morning, is to go out with the section boss and hunt both sides of the track?"

"Yes, and check up on the Center. And while I think of it, you better look the ice over at the Narrows, see if there's any tracks from Beaver Point to the other side, where you picked up your pulp man."

Parmley nodded and made a note. He then reached for his pipe and lit it, thinking. This idea of tracks on the ice was not new to him; he had left a double trail with his creepers on the ice at the Narrows, and here was just what he wanted, ordered by Hibbard.

"I don't look to find much in the way of tracks on the ice, it's pretty smooth. If there was a little snow, it might be different."

"Nails in shoes would make marks enough and gravel on the shore line, or cinders, would tip you off where he left the railroad."

"Oh, sure. I'll put creepers on and look the ice over. A man would bring down a lot of gravel and small stones with him if he got down the bank there in the dark. And I guess I'm good enough at trackin' to pick up a trail. I hope a lot of folks won't go running around on the lake down that way, when they hear of this robbery."

"The detectives told me to keep the news about the bag bottled up as well as I could, for awhile. They're afraid somebody'll find the bag, and hang on to it. You tell the section men it's just a bag with company records that you're looking for. The bank's afraid they may have a run if it's found out that they've had a heavy loss. Of course, the bank's safe enough, with the express company behind 'em on whatever cash there was, and up to the limit of value, and if the bonds are all registered, they can't lose there. But keep the thing under cover as well as you can."

"Oh, I understand that," said Parmley.

SHERIFF HIBBARD got to his feet, opened the door of the stove to throw away the stub of his cigar. "There's my car coming back," he said, taking out his watch. "I got to be on my way."

"Where can I reach you, Chief, if anything comes up?"

"It's a little past one. I'm going over to the depot and have the night operator flag the down express that goes through from Montreal in about twenty minutes. I aim to get off at Waynboro and meet the train that's got the detectives on it, maybe I'll go beyond Waynboro. Anyway, that'll give time on the way back to prime the Boston detectives with what you've handed me." His car was outside, and the driver blew the horn as a signal of arrival.

"I'm glad you come over so prompt," said Parmley, following Hibbard to the door.

"Yes, I'm glad myself. Never looked to pick up such good tips, and you've been a mighty help, I'll tell you that, Ed. It's the first time I've had a chance to work with you since you been my deputy here, and it does me good to find you so keen."

"Oh, we ought to clean this case up, Chief. Only thing is, I wish we could do it on our own before them express detectives get here. It'd look well for the election and you'd go in like a log down a mountain slide. But if they work on the case, no matter what we do, they'll claim all the credit."

"Don't you believe it!" said Sheriff Hibbard, as he put out a gloved hand, and shook hands with his deputy. "They'll have to start with the clues you've got, and if they win on that start, I'll make it my business to see that you get full credit."

"I ain't done much yet."

"You've done more'n anybody else. We've got a quick start on the robber—he, or them, may think they're smart, but I never saw a crook yet that didn't always leave a loophole, no matter how well they planned the job ahead. And this job, from what you've told me, has all the earmarks of having been planned mighty careful. But there's a loophole. I bet it's so big that when we work a little more, we'll fall through it. No case ever was worked out from a lot of pieces put together—look for the loophole, Ed—it's right under our noses now, if we could recognize it—big as a barn door."

"Looks like a pretty slick piece of work, Chief. But maybe we can out-slick 'em."

"We got to out-slick 'em! If I'm bunkered on this, I'll lose the election. I've been high sheriff of this county for more'n twenty years, and I don't intend to quit on account of this bag. You better get a little sleep before daylight, and be on the track as soon as you can see ten feet ahead of you."

"Leave it to me, good night."

Sheriff Hibbard climbed into his car and rolled away for Cheltenham depot.

Parmley shut the door. He stood for a few minutes in thought, running his fingers through his hair. "First," he told himself, "I got to run back and across at the Narrows with my creepers on—there's a loophole that needs to be plugged. Then I guess them express detectives are going to have to go some to find anything they can pry their noses into. With what Hibbard gives 'em, my fences are fixed."

He set his alarm clock for an hour before daylight, and went to bed.

III

PARMLEY arrived at Cheltenham depot with the section boss on a handcar at about half past nine. The up train, which was to bring Sheriff Hibbard with the two detectives, passed them at the Point, with the car off the track, and Parmley out on the Narrows. They had run as far as Tinsleyville, scanning the track on both sides, before returning to the sharp curve at Beaver Point and hunting the ice for signs of a trail. Parmley sent the handcar beyond the Point, toward Cheltenham, where it was derailed. This gave him a chance to get on the ice at about the same place he had picked up the bag, without the section boss being aware of the fact that there were creeper trails already on the ice.

The station agent informed Parmley that Sheriff Hibbard had arrived with two friends, and was waiting at the Cheltenham Hotel. Also, Parmley learned that Jim Stannard had arrived home. But while Parmley was eager to have a private talk with Stannard, the deputy felt it would not be safe to seek the brakeman before seeing the sheriff, and Parmley was anxious to take the measure of the detectives.

He hurried down past his office to the hotel, giving the section boss orders to take his crew out and make a more careful hunt of the banks along the track, on foot. The deputy felt sure that with his tracks on the ice accounted for by several trips with creepers, that no one would suspect any previous crossing by him.

When he reached the hotel, the old woman who was mopping the front hall, informed Parmley that the sheriff was upstairs and gave the number of the room. The front office; simply a cigar stand, a register, and a table and a few chairs, was deserted. The place had little business in the winter, except for drummers making their regular trips, and buyers of lumber and other products of the countryside.

Parmley ascended the stairs and rapped at the door. It was opened by Hibbard. Within, two men sat at a table, eating breakfast.

"Here's Mr. Parmley, my deputy for this town," said Hibbard, when he had shut the door. Parmley took off his cap, and threw aside his overcoat. "This is Mr. Reynolds, and this is Mr. Jameson," and Hibbard indicated each man with a wave of the hand.

Reynolds nodded over his cup of coffee. He was a thin-faced man with a longish nose. His collar was off, and the collar button in the open shirt band waggled as he drank. His brown hair was a trifle sparse in front and combed straight back to hide a bald spot. His jaws stuck out at the sides, giving his face a square aspect, and his little ears were bent forward. His blue eyes had a tired look in them and he seemed cross and disgruntled. He put down his cup and attacked his bacon and eggs with energy.

Jameson yawned as he nodded to Parmley. He was a man of middle age, with thin pale lips and squinting eyes. He wore a white collar, streaked with train soot. He sat with his side to the table, his feet sprawled out over the carpet, and lay back in his chair as if he were about to slip off it. His big black shoes were square-toed, and his white socks were inclined to wrinkle down over the uppers. He was much more interested in buttering hot biscuits and eating them, than in the arrival of Parmley. Parmley got the impression that he was a very lazy man.

"Be you the detectives?" asked Parmley, as he took a chair beside Hibbard.

"Guilty," said Reynolds. He pointed with a tired thumb at Jameson. "He's more of a detective than I am," and they grinned at each other.

"Well, I'm glad you've come," said Parmley. "We certainly need you fellers around here. Ain't that right, Sheriff?" It was Parmley's intention to play the simple country bumpkin with these men. He reasoned that the less intelligence he revealed, the safer he would be. He had built a puzzle for them, and he was willing to watch them attempt to solve it. The less they looked to him for help, dismissing him as stupid, the better chance he had of blocking them in their investigations. He felt safe with these two; they were not nearly so keen looking as he had expected they would be.

"I don't see that we can do much good," said Reynolds, as he pushed his plate away from him. "It looks to us as if Sheriff Hibbard, from what he's told us, has the case pretty well in hand."

"We've made a start," said Hibbard, modestly. "We want to be of as much help as we can."

Reynolds bit the end off a cigar and lit it. "We've heard about the work you've done on the case, Mr. Parmley."

"Oh, I ain't done much," said Parmley. "I just blundered into somethin' that the Chief here says is a pretty good start. But for him, I wouldn't make much out of it, but he thinks it's a pretty fair start. I ain't got brains enough to be a detective."

Reynolds laughed quietly. "You've got a good start to be a detective when you talk that way. It's the smart Alecks who fall down the hardest. Ain't I right, Jameson?"

Jameson buttered another biscuit, sadly. "You're right, the minute I think I know anything, that's when I'm in for a biff in the nose."

"Been down to the Narrows and hunted for a trail?" asked Hibbard, eager to get to business, and a little annoyed by the willingness of the detectives to waste time.

"Yes, been over the ice, and on both shores at the Point," said Parmley. "But I didn't see any sign of anybody crossin' from the railroad."

"That don't mean much," said Hibbard. "Our man may have had on a pair of rubbers, or he may have been smart enough to pull a pair of socks over his shoes. A man keen enough to plan this job, and pull it off, would likely mind what he was up to on ice smooth as glass. Ain't that the way you look at it, Mr. Jameson?"

"I'd say so, yes," said Jameson, pulling apart a fresh biscuit.

"I've been over the case pretty careful on our way up on the train," said Hibbard to Parmley. "They know all you told me. Now I want 'em to start in on their own tack, not married to any of my theories. Gentlemen," and he nodded to the detectives, "it's for you to say what you want to do next."

Reynolds puffed his cigar, his chair tilted back, and his eyes staring reflectively at the ceiling. "Mr. Parmley might tell us the whole thing over again, in detail: the man he saw get off the train, and the man he picked up in the road. Just as if we didn't know anything about it, you know."

"That's right," agreed Jameson. "There may be some little point that's been overlooked that may come out, if Mr. Parmley stirs his memory up again."

SHERIFF HIBBARD concealed his irritation. He was convinced that these men were more concerned with their own comfort than with getting on the trail of the thief. It was cold outside, and loafing and talking and smoking was much much agreeable to the strangers than driving around the country in an automobile.

Parmley was also annoyed. For days his nerves had been taut as a bowstring. He had prepared himself for a matching of wits with human bloodhounds, who would lose no time, but go after the work in hand in a brisk and businesslike way. Though he knew that the carelessness of these men meant safety for him and a surety of final success, he found himself angered at having to go over the case step by step for a pair who were listless and lazy.

But Parmley began his story all over again, from the time he had called up Landon to his return home. He went into great detail, hoping to tire them out by his slow method of telling a string of what they supposed were facts. He was the plain, slow-witted man of the usual small town, as far as he dared, in the presence of Hibbard. So Parmley built up his imaginary criminals with a simplicity that disarmed by its apparent frankness. The only detail he avoided was the telephone message he got from Jim Stannard, for instinct told the deputy sheriff that this would be dangerous ground. It was something that could be dismissed, if Hibbard had told of it, as of no importance. The fact that he had told Hibbard would be proof enough that there was no thought of concealing the point. And if Hibbard reminded Parmley of it, the deputy would know just how much value Hibbard put on the thing.

"And that's all there is to it," concluded Parmley, "until Sheriff Hibbard here showed up at my place around midnight—and I've got the section men out huntin' both sides of the track after takin' a quick look myself from a handcar."

"Plain enough to me," said Reynolds, "that we've got a clever crook on our hands. Maybe a gang. This job was pulled off by folks who knew their business."

Jameson nodded agreement. "We've got our hands full, I'd say, this time."

"I thought so myself, the part about having a clever gang on our hands," said Hibbard. "I'd say we ought to go over the ground."

"We didn't get any sleep last night," said Reynolds, "and we're pretty flat. We need a little time to think things over."

Hibbard got to his feet. "Well, gentlemen, unless you've got some orders for me, I'll go out and stir up some things myself, such as a little 'phoning around. I want to see what the Center knows, and maybe I'll take a run over there. Unless you want Mr. Parmley, he can go along with me."

"It's pretty cold outside," said Jameson. He yawned.

Hibbard reached for his overcoat and pulled it on. "I think maybe both of you need a little rest," said the sheriff, with a taint of sharpness in his voice.

Reynolds exchanged glances with Jameson, and both got to their feet. "I'll tell you what, Sheriff," said Reynolds, "it may be a good idea to run over the ground. We'll be better able to think things over if we've had a look at some of these places."

"All right," said Hibbard. "I'll fetch my car, and we'll take a run to Tinsleyville. That won't take very long."

Parmley followed the sheriff around to the garage at the back of the hotel.

"Well, what you think of 'em, Chief?" asked Parmley quietly.

Hibbard spat on the floor of the garage. "Think! I don't think at all. They ain't detectives, they lost their jobs in Boston and they got on a train. I'd say they worked in a shoe store."

"They're dead fish," agreed Parmley. "If I don't miss my guess, they'll fall flat on this case."

"They're dead and they don't know it," snorted Hibbard, as he prepared the car. "I wouldn't hire 'em to catch a chicken thief!"

Parmley laughed outright. It was a relief to him to learn that Hibbard despised the detectives. For the first time in several days, Parmley's nerves relaxed, and he felt a glow of satisfaction that he had so completely covered his tracks in every way.

"You know what they was doing on the way up on the train, after I told 'em what we knew about the case?"

"No, what?"

"'Stead of going over the thing with me, point by point, this man Reynolds spends his time gassing with the brakeman about fishing up in this country, and that dummy of a Jameson lays back in his seat and goes to sleep."

"They don't intend to do much, but draw their pay," said Parmley. "And when we've done the work, they'll step in and claim the reward."

"Shucks!" said Hibbard. "Don't you worry none about them birds collecting any reward. I'll bet on you, Parmley, when it comes to finishing this job off! You got more sense in your little finger'n the both of them put together have in their heads—both tied together with binder twine, and called one man!"

"I don't see that I'm going to be much good," said Parmley.

"Ed, if them fellers are detectives, you ought to be the chief of police in New York."

Again Parmley laughed. This indignation of his chief soothed him. Now he was convinced that his wits were really far beyond the abilities of the two detectives and that meant relief from strain for the future. The detectives, he reasoned, would simply waste a week or two, and return to Boston with an admission of failure.

WHEN they got round to the front door with the car, Reynolds and Jameson were on the porch, in overcoats. They climbed into the rear seat. As the car moved out Hibbard explained that they were taking the road in the same direction Parmley had taken the night before, when he went to Landon's to buy pears. And when they had passed under the railroad and had crossed the log bridge, Hibbard went on with his explanation of the lay of the land. "This is the cross roads, where we take the road to Tinsleyville, the other road is to the Center, as you can see by the guidepost. See that low point to the right on the side of the lake we've just come from? That's Beaver Point and the railroad cuts it off from the lake. That railroad heads for Tinsleyville, you can see some of the houses down through the Narrows. It's there we think the man who got off the train at Tinsleyville, come back this way on the track, crossed the Narrows to this road on the right, and was picked up by Parmley on his way home from Tinsleyville."

"Yes, I see," said Reynolds. Jameson remained silent, looking over the frozen lake to the Narrows.

"I want to run over to the Center and see if they know anything about the man who was buying pulp wood," said Hibbard, and swung his car to the left.

Cheltenham Center consisted of a dozen houses, a general store and a sawmill. Reynolds and Jameson remained in the car while Hibbard and Parmley went about and made inquiries. Nobody at the Center had seen a stranger in weeks, and no one had heard of a man buying pulp in the last year.

"It was all smoke, that story of your man, just as I thought it would be," said Hibbard, as they walked back to the car from the farthest house. "He never went to the Center at all. Maybe he had a car hid alongside the road, came here and got it after you let him out, went back and picked up his pal, if he had one, and drove away with the bag in the direction of Springfield."

"We're hung up, so far," admitted Parmley.

"Them lazy-bones in the car!" breathed Hibbard disgustedly. "They ain't worth their salt! You'd think they'd want to ask some questions here, instead of letting us do all the work."

"Find out anything?" asked Reynolds, as they reached the car.

"Found out enough to be sure I was right when I said Parmley's passenger never come here," said Hibbard, as he climbed into his seat. He kept his theory of the hidden car on the roadside to himself, determined now that if there was to be any solution of the case by the detectives, they would have to do their own digging.

"So far, so good," said Reynolds. "Where do we go now?"

"Tinsleyville," said Hibbard. On the way, Parmley pointed out the gate of Landon's place, and the bend in the road where he picked up his passenger. Reynolds and Jameson looked the scenery over with bored expression, and shivered in their coats.

It was not until they had gained the high ground behind Tinsleyville depot, with the building five hundred feet away, that the detectives began to take any interest.

"This is about where I stopped my car," said Parmley, more to Hibbard than the pair in the back seat. "It was dark. The tail end of the train was a little this side of that switch. The man jumped off there, and I looked for him to come this way, but instead, he turned down the track toward Beaver Point."

"It begins to fit together in my mind now," admitted Reynolds, leaning out of the car and craning his neck. "The train was coming this way and one of the cars, from here, was behind the depot. That right?"

"You've got it," said Parmley. "I saw him swing off by the light from the open door of the last car and I got just a glimpse of him when he passed the red switch light."

Reynolds and Jameson studied the panorama before them; the black ice of the newly-frozen lake, the railroad curving away to Beaver Point, the distant Narrows, the bush fringed road they had just traversed and the turn where the mythical passenger had been picked up.

"I'd say," observed Jameson, "that the man Mr. Parmley picked up was the same man he saw drop off the train—he went down the track, crossed the lake, and got free transportation as far as the crossroads."

"Exactly what I've been telling you!" declared Hibbard, his disgust softened by this agreement with his own theory.

Parmley grinned mentally; they had all walked into the trap he had so cleverly baited.

"But," went on Jameson, "if Parmley dropped the man at the crossroads, and he's never been heard of in Cheltenham Center, where did he go to after he was dropped at the crossroads? He must have skipped without having been seen, or he's still in this neighborhood, hiding away."

"That's what we've got to find out," said Hibbard.

"Let's get out," begged Reynolds. "It's too cold to do any thinking here. Woof! That wind off the lake! It's got a kick to it like a mule!"

"Want to talk to Jed Liggitt?" asked Hibbard.

"Not necessary," said Reynolds. "We better go back to the hotel. I want a hot bath, I'm chilled to the bone. Never expected to find it so cold up in this neck of the woods."

"All right," said Hibbard, in a voice of discouragement. "You better take the chill out of your bones." The sheriff would have preferred to talk with Liggitt, and demonstrate his work on the case.

When they reached the sharp turn where Parmley had picked up his passenger, he asked Hibbard to stop. "I got an idea," he said to Hibbard. "I'll get out here. You can go along," and he gave the sheriff a sly poke in the ribs to indicate that he did not want to share his new idea with the strangers.

"What we need is ideas," said Hibbard, with cautious irony. "We've kind of run out of 'em lately."

Parmley quit the car, and pulled his ice creepers from his overcoat pocket. "I went over that ice between here and the Point," he said thoughtfully, "but there's a spot this side of the lake I want to look over a little more careful. We may be off the track by thinking our man made his crossing right at the Narrows. Maybe he did and maybe he didn't. If he was a stranger, on a dark night he might have missed the narrowest place to cross, and maybe he got over above or below the Point, and came into the road where we'd least expect to look for his trail. If he was walking toward the crossroads when I overtook him, how long had he been walking on this road and how long had he been across the lake, before I picked him up?"

"Now, Ed, you're getting at it!" said Hibbard.

Parmley managed a sly wink to his chief.

"You take a look, especially for any trail through the bushes that comes up the bank. The brush is pretty dry now, and he'd crack off some branches."

"All right," said Parmley. "I'll come in on foot when I've hacked around a little," and he went into the leafless brush at the side of the road with his ice creepers tinkling musically from their straps hanging from his hand.

"I'll be at the hotel or at the telephone office for the next couple of hours," said Hibbard.

And the sheriff drove away with the shivering detectives.

IV

BY THE time Parmley had worked his way down through the brush to the shore of the lake and had strapped on his creepers, Hibbard's car had crossed the log bridge and disappeared in the direction of Cheltenham.

The deputy walked along slowly, making a pretense of looking for tracks. At sandy spots on the beach, he walked off the ice and got on the sand, to leave proof that he had made a careful search for any possible trail. He whistled softly under his breath, hissing out a tune, a way he had when deep in thought.

He no longer feared the detectives. He had reached the conclusion that they were either too lazy or too dull witted to be any menace. But he wondered if other detectives would be sent if Reynolds and Jameson made a failure of the case. That would mean more conferences and examinations for all concerned. Parmley was beginning to worry about Jim Stannard. The brakeman might not be able to stand up under more conferences and examinations, cross examinations by various sets of detectives might wear Stannard down so that he would betray his guilt.

Parmley knew that the most ideal conditions for him would be to wait a few weeks. Yet delay might mean some slip. He was beginning to worry about the loophole which all criminals left in the best of plans and he had taken to going over in his mind, hour after hour, his whole structure of deceit, testing it in every point. Though he could not find the slightest chink in the barrier he had built up for Hibbard and the detectives, this unending repetition of every act of preparation and execution was tiring him. This hunting for the danger spot was becoming a nuisance, yet he could not prevent his brain from rehearsing over and over all that he had accomplished.

He knew it might create suspicion if he acted too promptly, yet he had reasoned out a conclusion that he could safely close things up without more delay. He knew Hibbard would be delighted, and that

Stannard would be relieved. Parmley was not making his decision, he told himself, in any panic of fear or worry; but his nerves were crying for relief from strain.

As a matter of fact, the seeming laziness of the detectives was what worried Parmley. They had a peculiar and uncanny way about them which indicated more knowledge than they admitted. They seemed to have no doubt at all but what they could solve the riddle he had built for them and Reynolds had talked with a brakeman on the train from Boston. The conversation may have been innocent enough, yet Parmley found the thought of it recurring over and over. Sheriff Hibbard had regarded Reynolds' conversation with the strange brakeman as sheer waste of time. But it was the one thing which worried Parmley.

"They ain't so lazy as they sound, that pair," the deputy told himself as he trudged along. "The answer to why they don't hustle things along more, is that other men are on the case. In the next week Jim Stannard'll be watched every minute, while these two birds sit around Cheltenham and kid me and Hibbard along. I'll be working in the dark, and not knowing what's going on. I got to make my strike quick and get Jim Stannard off my hands, or he'll crab the game on me."

He pushed on until he was abreast of the Burnham place. Then he turned in and pushed his way up the bank, breaking a branch here and there as he went. He came out on the road after a climb of about fifteen feet.

He unstrapped his creepers and pocketed them. Then, making sure no one was in sight on the road in either direction, he walked rapidly up the wooded lane to the deserted house.

He broke in the sash of the window through which he had thrust the paper bag the night before, and climbed into the room. He unrolled the bag, and tossed it back on the floor without examining it. He crawled out through the window, hurried down to the road, and broke into a run for Landon's place. He arrived panting, and knocked at the door.

"I want to use your telephone," he said. "It's important."

"Goodness sake, Ed!" said Mrs. Landon, a woman with white hair wearing a kitchen apron, "you'll kill yourself if you run like that! Somebody dead?"

"No, I just want to catch Sheriff Hibbard at the hotel," he replied, and followed her down the hall to the wall telephone.

"You go right ahead and telephone—I got some cookin' I've got to watch."

Parmley got the hotel and asked for Hibbard.

"What's up anyhow, Ed?" asked Hibbard presently.

Parmley talked between gasps for breath. "I'm on the track, chief."

"Fine! What've you struck?"

"Our man broke through the brush from the lake 'way down near the log bridge, 'stead of where we thought."

"This side of Beaver Point?"

"Yeah—quarter of a mile. That's where we been fooled."

"Good work!"

"Keep it to yourself," warned Parmley. "That ain't the best I've got—I'm on a dead cinch line." His voice was full of the excitement suitable to a great discovery.

"What is it?"

"Don't want to talk too much on this wire."

"Well, tip me in a way that'll be safe."

"Know what I mean when I say bread and cheese—well, I've run into some."

"By George! That's a hot track!"

"Hotter'n I want to say. You better meet me at the crossroads, quick as you can—alone—understand?"

"I got ye!"

"Be sure you've got your gun and bring one for me. We're close up. Go over to the hardware store and tell Howe to let me have a pair of them long-barrelled revolvers, and some shells. We're likely to dig our man out and he'll most likely fight."

"Sure!" said Hibbard. "If it's as close as that, we need to be able to put up a fight. I'll be on my way just as soon as I see Howe, without a word to anybody. This is our little job."

PARMLEY thanked Mrs. Landon and departed in a hurry. Before he had reached the Burnham place, he saw Hibbard's car tearing over the log bridge. The trees and brush of the roadside concealed Parmley from the sheriff, so there was no chance to signal him to keep coming, but in the next couple of minutes Hibbard was in sight down the road. Parmley waved his arms to come on.

"Go right ahead for Tinsleyville," said

Parmley as he jumped into the car. "We don't want to show anybody who might be watching the road from the hill that we're on the trail. I'll tell you what happened. We've got to work careful."

As the car rolled along, Parmley related briefly his two "discoveries"; the trail up from the lake and the paper bag with scraps of food. "And the bag come from the Junction—Hymer's Cash Store. When I saw what I had, I dropped it, and dug out of the house for a 'phone. For all I know, he was in the house while I was there, and it's a wonder, if he was, that I didn't get my head blowed off. Anyhow, I walked away slow, as if I hadn't struck anything suspicious."

"That's right," said Hibbard, in high excitement. "If he was watching you go away, he maybe thought you wouldn't be back and he'll stick there till dark, anyway."

"That's the way I looked at it," said Parmley. "If he's in there, we got to get him before dark—but I needed somebody to back me up."

"Here's your gun. You don't want to walk into a shooting game alone without knowing what you've got on your hands. Maybe I better go back to Cheltenham and swear in a posse, while you go up in the woods back of the Burnham place and keep watch on the house."

Hibbard stopped the car as they passed the bend in the road where Parmley had reported his passenger of the night before. They were now out of sight of the Burnham place.

"You use your own judgment about a posse," said Parmley. "But I'd rather look that house over without having a crowd around and them detectives'll come along and claim the credit for any catch we make."

Sheriff Hibbard thought it over. "Maybe you're right. No matter what you've done on the case, or what we do, the detectives will take all the credit for cleaning the thing up under our noses. I want you to have that reward, Ed. That'll give me the credit for the catch, and if we mop this thing up ourselves, I'll go into office again like clockwork. It'll be a good joke on these detectives if we can mop up while they're at the hotel taking a bath." His shoulders shook with laughter as he turned the car in the road.

"We'll leave the car at Landon's place, just inside the gate," said Parmley. "Then we'll drift up into the woods and come along back of the Burnham place, and work down near it. That'll give us time to think, and we may see something."

"Of course," said Hibbard, "that bag of bread and cheese may mean that our man stopped only a few minutes. But we're on the track, that's sure. We may pick up the trail, especially if our man headed back into the hills, as I'd say he would."

They left the car in the Landon lane and jumped the fence to climb the hillside under cover of the trees. They made their way as quietly as possible to an old orchard behind the Burnham house. A stone wall that ran along the side of the hill, parallel with the road below, gave them cover. They had a view of the windows of the gable end away from the road, two on the ground floor from the kitchen and one from an upstairs room.

Beyond the house the frozen lake stretched away before them, to the steeple and the outlying buildings of Cheltenham, the village itself hidden in a narrow gulley-like valley. To the right, below the watchers, were the crossroads and the log bridge; to the left, was Beaver Point, and beyond, the farmhouses of Tinsleyville on the hillsides. Thus they had in view all the roads leading away from the house below.

Behind the house were flats, the only open spaces through which a man could escape to the hills. If a man attempted to leave by daylight, he could only gain cover by swinging to the left or right from the gardens. Hibbard and Parmley now controlled the gardens, which were within revolver range from their position behind the stone wall.

They watched half an hour. Then Hibbard declared that he would wait no longer, but would go down to the house.

"Why not fire your revolver? That may bring somebody to a window to look out," suggested Parmley.

Hibbard threw up his revolver and fired. But there was no sign of life at the windows.

"That settles it," said Hibbard. "We'll go down and look the house over from cellar to attic."

They jumped the wall and hurried across the gardens, watching the house carefully as they approached. Parmley remained behind in the garden, far enough from the back wall of the building to command a view of both sides, while Hibbard went round to the front door.

There came a crash of splintering wood as Hibbard tore out the broken sash. Presently he appeared at one of the curtainless back windows, motioning to have Parmley come in from the front.

"I'll go up and look the bedrooms over," said Hibbard as Parmley entered. "I'll look that bag over when I'm sure there's nobody around the upper floors. You hold on here so I can't be cut off on the stairs." He held his revolver with the muzzle upward, ready for a drop shot and opened the door to the stairway.

"Come down out of there!" called Hibbard. "We've got you, and there's a posse up in the hills!"

There was no answering sound. Hibbard swung up the stairway, taking three steps at a bound. Parmley then heard him tramping around in the vacant rooms overhead. Then Hibbard came down.

"Top of the house as empty as a last year's bird's nest," declared the sheriff. "Unless he's in the cellar, our man has skipped. So that's the bag, is it?"

Hibbard picked up the package and unrolled it. He shook out the cheese on a windowsill, being careful not to touch it. "I'd say it was left here last night. Pretty fresh cheese and bacon. Neither of 'em dried up, to speak of." He sniffed the bacon. "We want to keep this cheese careful—may be finger prints on it." He shook the stuff all back into the bag, rolled it up, and stuffed it into his side overcoat pocket.

"Then we'd better try the cellar, eh?" suggested Parmley.

"Yes, that'll finish up, the cellar and the little woodshed." He walked to the cellar door in the kitchen. "Say, the hasp on this door can't be opened from the cellar stairs—and that means he ain't down there now, if he looked to come through this door from below."

"I better open the rollway," said Parmley. "It'll give us more light, anyway, I got my flashlight in my pocket."

THEY went outside and swung both sides of the rollway upward and let them fall back on the grass and weeds. Then they descended the stone stairs, Hibbard leading the way, his revolver ready, and Parmley behind, a revolver in one hand and his flashlight in the other.

"We've got you cornered!" called Hibbard. "Come out and give up!"

Only the rumble of Hibbard's voice came back to him from the gloomy distant corners of the place. The weeds had grown up about the tiny cellar windows, so the only light that entered came through the rollway.

Parmley turned on his flashlight and sprayed the darkness in the far corners with a cone of yellow brilliance. But the two men could make out nothing except the stairs, the whitewashed walls, and a pile of trash and window blinds in a far corner.

"Might as well clean the job up right," said Hibbard. "We'll make sure nobody's hiding over around that mess of stuff." He advanced along the path of light from Parmley's lamp. The deputy followed.

The light was squirted over and around the pile of trash.

"Ain't nobody here," declared Hibbard after a few minutes of search. He headed back for the rollway stairs.

Parmley lingered, trying his light in dark places. He shot a beam between the pile of blinds and the wall, low down and gave a startled exclamation.

Hibbard turned swiftly. "What's the matter?" he demanded.

"There's something packed in behind them blinds—between 'em at the bottom, and the cellar wall—where they lean away at the floor." He kept the light boring into the narrow triangular space.

Hibbard was beside him in an instant, and got down to his knees to examine the opening into which the light was flooding.

"I saw something bright!" went on Parmley—and a big brown thing that looks like a dog laying down.

"Why, damn it all!" exclaimed Sheriff Hibbard. "That's the bag! What you saw that shines is the lock and the steel loops that hold the chain!"

"You don't say!"

"I'm right! And the bag's full! Ain't been emptied at all—unless it's full of something that was stuffed into it!"

Hibbard attempted to reach in and pull the bag out, but it was in too far, and was wedged tightly.

"Wait till I find something to hook it out with," and Parmley dropped his flashlight and frantically dug around in the junk of the pile. He found an old mop, and the iron at the end of the handle made a perfect tool for the work in hand.

"Let me at it, Chief!"

Hibbard got to his feet and picked up the flashlight. Parmley thrust the mop handle far in, and thrashed it about until the iron at the end had engaged the chain of the bag. With a tug, he dragged the bag clear of the blinds.

"Gosh a'mighty!" breathed the sheriff. "The lock's all right—and the chain—and the leather ain't been cut." He sprayed the bag with light.

"Don't that beat all!" gasped Parmley.

"Look out that we don't get shot from that rollway," cautioned Hibbard, as he picked the bag up in his arms. "The bonds are in here, I'd say and packages of currency. Ed, you've turned the trick on them slick detectives from Boston! I'm re-elected just as if the votes was all counted!"

"What we better do, Chief?"

"We better make ourselves scarce around here! Grab that chain and I'll take the strap on the bottom! Have your gun handy, and we'll skip!"

With the bag between them, and their revolvers in their free hands, they hurried up the stone stairs and made for the road.

"Run and get my car, Ed! I'll stick here and shoot it out with anybody that wants to take this bag away from me."

V

SHERIFF HIBBARD sent two telegrams when he and Parmley reached Cheltenham depot. They notified the Shirley Junction Bank and the express company in Boston that the rewards of five thousand offered by each for the recovery of the leather bag with its contents were claimed for Deputy Sheriff Parmley. Then they went to Parmley's office, and telephoned to the hotel for the detectives, without reporting the recovery of the bag.

"I guess we'll show these Boston birds something in the detective line, hey Ed?" exulted Hibbard, as he threw the bag on Parmley's desk, and stood grinning at the treasure.

Parmley shook down the grate in the stove, put on more coal, and threw off his cap and overcoat. "Looks like you'll be my boss for another four years, Chief," said the deputy.

"Shake!" cried Hibbard, as he thrust out his hand. "Ed, that's the best piece of work that's been done since I went into office twenty-five years ago! There's only one thing I'm afraid of."

"What's that?" A worried look came over Parmley's face.

"That you'll be elected high sheriff yourself if you was to run."

Parmley laughed. "Not a chance! I can't claim all the credit, Chief. I'd never have put two and two together like you did with the man I saw drop off the car and the man I picked up in the road. And I don't think I ought to get all the reward, neither."

"You'll get every cent of it! I don't want a mite. And you're coming to the Junction to be my chief deputy in my office. That means a good job and good pay, but you'll be my right hand man from now on, Ed."

"I appreciate that, but when do we catch this man who got away with the bag. That's the next thing."

Hibbard slapped the bag with his hand. "We took the first trick, now it's up to the boys from Boston to give us a little help on that end of the case! It's up to them to do something or get out and leave the job to us!"

"Here they come," said Parmley, looking out of the window.

Reynolds and Jameson were hurrying up past the drugstore. People came out of stores to look after the two strangers, for the word had gone around that something exciting had happened, and that Sheriff Hibbard was about to arrest somebody.

Parmley opened the door when he heard the sounds of feet on the steps outside.

Reynolds was the first to enter. His eyes fell upon the bag, and he stopped in his tracks, and stared at Hibbard, who stood beside the desk.

"What's that?" asked Reynolds.

Jameson looked over Reynolds' shoulder and gave a gasp of surprise.

"That's the bag, just the same as when it was lost from the express car," said Hibbard. "Thought you gentlemen'd be a little surprised."

Parmley stood by the stove, poker in hand, for he had been stirring up the coal. The detectives looked at the deputy, and back to Hibbard.

"Who found it?" asked Reynolds.

Hibbard jerked a hand in the direction of his deputy. "Mr. Ed Parmley, and I've sent telegrams claiming the reward for him."

"Good work!" exclaimed Reynolds, to Parmley, and held out his hand to the deputy. "We looked for a long and hard hunt on this case, and the bag was the last thing we expected to pick up. But we can't waste any time, unless you've got the yegg that had this hid. We got to be on the jump after him."

Jameson stepped forward and shook hands with Parmley. "I call it a pretty keen piece of work, Mr. Parmley. You're certainly the logical person for the reward."

"Now, let's get to business," said Reynolds, pulling off his coat and sitting down. "Give me the high spots on this just as quick as you can."

Sheriff Hibbard took a chair, and Parmley sat down near the stove, leaned forward in his chair, the poker in his hand, ready to give the fire attention. The sheriff told his story in short order. Jameson made a few notes in a book.

"Mr. Parmley certainly has pulled off a clever piece of work, take it all around," said Reynolds. "I might as well let you in on the fact that Mr. Jameson here ain't a detective at all, but a Boston reporter who goes out with me on a case now and then."

"So it'll all be in the papers?" asked Hibbard delightedly.

"Of course," said Jameson. "It's just what I came for and couldn't be better—country sheriff beats Boston detectives in solving mystery," and he grinned across at Reynolds.

"Oh, lay off that kiddin' stuff!" objected Reynolds. "This young man had the jump on me by several hours, and he was on his own ground. But I don't intend to take any credit away from you on that account, Mr. Parmley."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," declared Hibbard. "Mr. Parmley deserves full credit—he practically took charge of the job, as you could see when he left the car on the way back from Tinsleyville. And he's entitled to every mite of that reward."

"Exactly, Sheriff. And I'll do everything I can to see that Mr. Parmley gets everything that's coming to him and Jameson'll see that the paper has the thing up to the hilt. Now I want to get on the track of the man or men we want and I'd like a little better description of the man Mr. Parmley saw get off the back end of the train at Tinsleyville—just a rough description, you know." The detective swung round on Parmley.

Parmley straightened up, a trifle surprised. "I can't tell much about him more'n what I've told already. As I said, I thought it was Ev Johnson, about his build, I'd say."

"See how he was dressed?" asked Reynolds.

"No, can't say I did. Best I could say would be that he had a felt hat on, with the brim down in front and maybe he wore a short overcoat, but I can't swear to that, neither."

Reynolds shook his head in a puzzled way. "I don't understand this man you saw get off the train at all and I don't see how he could be on that train."

"Neither do I," said Parmley, a trifle sharply. "All I know is that I saw him."

"You saw him get off?"

"Sure I saw him get off."

"No doubt about his swinging down off the back platform?"

"If I had any doubt about it, I'd ha' said so."

"Well, of course," said Reynolds soothingly, "I only want to make sure that you're sure about what you saw. It was dark, and you were on the rise above the depot—and you maybe was mistaken about his getting off the back end of the train."

"Maybe I am," admitted Parmley. "I could make a mistake right enough." He stood up and opened the damper in the stove-pipe so the stove would draw better. His nerves were jumpy now, and he feared that Reynolds was laying a trap for him.

"We all make mistakes," went on Reynolds, in that same silky voice. "But I can't make mistakes, and hold my job. If you made a mistake about this, I can't pick up your mistake and work with it."

"Say," said Parmley, still on his feet, and looking straight down into the face of the sitting Reynolds, "what makes you so sure I made a mistake? It's an open and shut thing I told about seeing a man get off the train! What you trying to do? Make a fool out of me?"

"No," said Reynolds patiently. "All I'm trying to do is make sure that you don't make a fool out of me!"

"Guess you're a little mad to see that bag on my desk."

Reynolds laughed. "No, I'm glad to see it there. But I'm not the man who started the idea that maybe you was mistaken when you saw a man get off the back end of the train." He kept his eyes on Parmley's eyes.

"What man?"

"Jerry Newton, conductor of that train they call the Peanut."

Parmley caught his breath. "What does Jerry Newton know about what I saw?"

"Nothing, exactly nothing. But he had tickets from everybody on that train, and knew nearly everybody. All the passengers got off at their proper stations."

"My man may have been stealing a ride, and sneaked off the train."

"Perfectly good answer and a good idea."

"He got off the train, that's all I care about and there's the bag! That's something to go on, anyway!"

"You couldn't see the back platform of the last car on the train, could you?"

"No, I couldn't—didn't have to, to see the man drop off the steps."

"Then you didn't see two men standing on the back of the train, on each side of the open door, you couldn't see 'em, from where you had your car up on the rise."

Parmley's eyes flickered slightly. They got moist on him, for some strange reason, and he found it hard to hold Reynolds' eyes.

"No, I didn't see no two men."

"All right. I'll tell you that two men stood on the back platform of the last car of that train while it was in Tinsleyville, and had been there, smoking, before the train got into Tinsleyville. Also, they stood there after the train pulled out. The door of the car was open, and they stood outside and smoked, because the smoker was up next to the baggage car. And they didn't see anybody get off the back platform, and nobody could have got off the back platform, or walked back down the track, without being seen by these two men. We just got a pretty complete telephone report from some of our own men at Shirley Junction, after they've gone into this matter with the two men at great length."

Parmley sat down, conscious of the fact that Sheriff Hibbard was looking puzzled and worried.

"Now," went on Reynolds, softly but probingly, "are you so sure that the man you saw *got off the back platform?*"

"No. Maybe he stepped around from the other side of the train, and had jumped off the train nearer the engine."

"All right. Now you understand why I wanted you to be sure of what you saw, so I wouldn't make any mistakes on your mistakes."

"I guess you've got Ed pinned pretty hard to just what he saw," suggested Sheriff Hibbard.

"I've got to be accurate, Sheriff."

"Ed was accurate enough to find the bag and that's pretty good shooting, I'd say."

"It's perfect shooting," admitted Reynolds. "But now I'm checking up to find the man we want. And there's another little point I want to go over."

"All right—go ahead," said Parmley, and smiled.

"I don't believe you mentioned this to us, Mr. Parmley, but Jerry Newton, the conductor, says Jim Stannard went to the depot restaurant at Waynboro for a pail of coffee, and he telephoned to somebody."

"He telephoned to me."

"Ed told me all about that," said Hibbard.

"Not all of it, Sheriff. All right—the Waynboro records show Stannard telephoned you. As Stannard was the only man in the express car besides Jerry Newton, beyond the regular crew of the car, that telephone message to you is a trifle important."

Parmley's lips tightened.

"What did you hear from Jim Stannard at Waynboro that was important enough to be telephoned to you?" pressed Reynolds.

"Stannard telephoned me to tell his wife he was making an extra run, and wouldn't be home till this morning. I didn't see anything about it to mix into this robbery case. And you just made a crack about not telling you about it! If I had any reason to hide Jim's message, I wouldn't have told the sheriff."

"That's right," said Hibbard. "Ed didn't have any reason for keeping it under cover."

"Did you see Stannard's wife—or tell her the message?"

"No. I got the girl at the central office to send word to Jim's wife."

"Why didn't Jim tell the telephone girl to send the message? She has sent messages before without having you called up, and it looks funny that Stannard, who was in the express car, had to telephone you the night this bag was lost and never telephoned you before."

"What you driving at?" demanded Parmley, his face white and his lips lifting from his teeth as he leaned forward to Reynolds.

"Yes, that's what I want to know?" cried Hibbard angrily.

"I'm driving at thief-catching, that's what," said Reynolds. "I can't help it if you don't like the questions I ask. It's up to you to provide answers that suit me."

"Ain't you suited?" snarled Parmley.

"Perfectly satisfied."

Parmley dropped into a chair. "All right, so'm I," he growled.

"SHERIFF HIBBARD, where's the paper bag with the cheese and bacon? I want it."

Hibbard got to his feet and fished the parcel out of his pocket. Parmley stared at Reynolds in astonishment, the fear he felt showing itself in trembling lips and moist eyes.

Reynolds took the package and leaped from his chair for the open door of the back room. Parmley snapped to his feet and made a move to follow, but Jameson barred his path—and a revolver bore upon Parmley.

"What you mean by drawing a gun on me?" demanded the deputy sheriff.

"Here! Put that gun away!" cried Hibbard, rising, his face drawn with anger.

"Just stand where you are for a minute," said Jameson quietly to Parmley. And to Hibbard, "It's all right, Sheriff—I want to make sure nobody else does any shooting—first."

Reynolds was back at once, a flitch of bacon in one hand and the rolled paper bag in the other.

"Take the bacon out of the bag, Sheriff," said Reynolds. "I want you to witness this and see for yourself just what's what."

Hibbard, puzzled and upset, drew the slices of bacon from the paper bag. Reynolds reached for one of the slices, and put it on the end of the flitch that had been cut.

"See here, Sheriff! This slice fits perfectly to Parmley's stock of bacon. The lean and the fat of the slice fit the lean and fat of the flitch like a jig-saw puzzle. Maybe your deputy can explain *that!*"

Sheriff Hibbard swung round on Parmely. "What's this, Ed? It looks bad and I guess they've got you cornered."

Parmley slumped down into a chair. His body quivered with convulsive tremors, and the water ran from his eyes down his pale cheeks.

"I—I thought I hadn't left any loopholes, but—"

"I arrest you, Parmley, for having stolen goods," snapped Reynolds. "It's my business to think a little, too, and you didn't think enough, that's all."

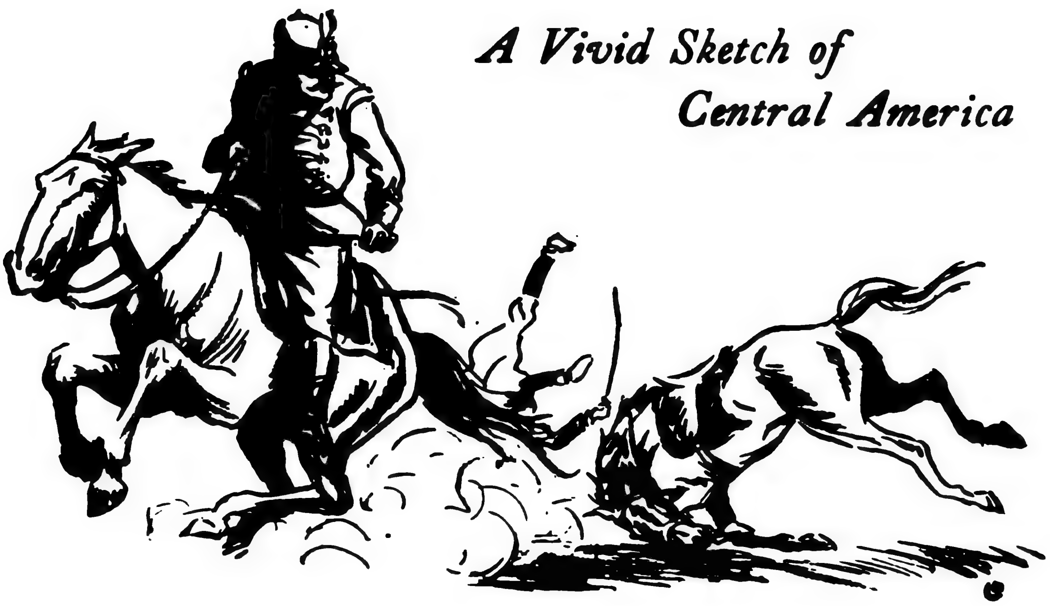
Hibbard sat down, aghast at the situation. "I told you, Ed—they always leave loopholes."

Parmley turned sidewise in his chair and beat his knees with the palms of his hands. "If I'd just had sense enough to ha' throwed my bacon away!" he moaned.

"If you'd just had sense enough to think you couldn't outthink folks who make a business of thinking," said Reynolds, as he took a pair of handcuffs from his pocket.

"You—you acted like a pair of fools," flared Parmley. "If you'd done anything—if you'd worked on the case, like I expected you would—"

"We don't have to work," broke in Reynolds. "You chaps always do the work for us, that makes it easy for us. Now we've got to go up and see that poor fool of a Stannard. Before he kicks any bags off trains again, he'll most likely make sure that he's doing it for a man who's a little smarter than you are, Parmley."


A Vivid Sketch of Central America

The Old Horse

By JOHN STEUART ERSKINE

"I ADMIT he isn't a beauty," said Baca gravely; "but he can carry me. It isn't every horse that can take care of my eight *arrobas*."

"Eight?" repeated Heller, grinning.

"Well, perhaps nine," admitted Baca grudgingly. "So much more credit to my horse."

"If ever you wish to sell him," put in Paz, "I will offer you ten dollars for him. His skin is worth that."

Baca shook his head sadly and stared through the orange trees at the old bay horse which stood saddled by the gate. "Such is the irony of life," he said thoughtfully. "You jeer at my poor old horse because he is ugly. Yet better men than you will ever be once died because of him." No one spoke for a moment, for Baca's stories were interminable. "He was to blame for it all," Baca went on invitingly.

"How was that?" asked Winter, leaning forward eagerly.

"It is a long story," said Baca impressively, happy to have found a listener. Heller sighed deeply and stared across the verandah at me, and I sighed back at him. "You wish to hear the story," continued Baca, waving a hand to Winter. "Then listen. These others can sleep or go off by themselves and discuss how much whisky they drank last night. That will please them.

"The story concerns two men whom I knew long ago, at college, Tiburcio Ulloa and Gil Villatoro."

Paz muttered an exclamation of interest. Great names always pleased him. "Not the Tiburcio Ulloa who was president once?" asked Heller.

"The same," assented Baca. "Gil I knew first, before ever Tiburcio came to the college. A solid fellow, Gil, with no great ambitions and no great powers, but likeable, very likeable, and capable. I was very fond of him, but I saw his weakness. There are some men born to lead, and some to follow. Gil was of the latter. He attached himself to the friendly and masterful and was content to admire and help, believing himself to be too weak to act for himself. Yet he was six feet tall, strong as an ox, and not unintelligent—but timid, timid as a girl, afraid of hurting the feelings of others.

"Then Tiburcio came to the college. He came with his reputation ready-made, for his father had been president before him.

There are many people like that; they have no need to make their names, perhaps they could not, but they can support one that has already been made for them. Tiburcio was very able, a little fellow with very black eyes and a dark face—I believe his mother was an Indian—and a mustache that made him president later on. Before he had been in the college a month, he was leader of a revolutionary society that was going to make the republic the equal of Rome, and Gil was his first lieutenant.

"Tiburcio was brilliant. When he talked to us—yes, I was one of the society—I could almost believe that through liberalism—he was a red—lay salvation. We are all patriots when young. Now I know that a man serves the state best by championing his own interest. Not all a man's countrymen are his compatriots, but only those who are willing to cooperate in the work of attaining to his ends.

"We used to do considerable fencing at school in those days, and our society practised more than any—a sort of 'Three Musketeers' pose. It was wonderful to watch Tiburcio fight. We were all slow beside him. Gil was very good, too, for he had a long reach; but when he came up against Tiburcio, he seemed paralyzed, and the little Tiburcio, jumping like a cockroach, touched him here, there, everywhere, and Gil smiled his good-natured, admiring smile, saluted, and came back to guard. He did not resent being beaten by Tiburcio, for it never occurred to him that he himself might win if he dared.

"One day, one of the liberal politicians gave an address near the college. In a melodious, powerful voice he called upon his hearers to consider the iniquities of the despotic blue government and sketched us a picture of the happiness of the country if the tyrants were overthrown. And we, young fools, all shouted, '*Viva el partido liberal!*' and threw stones at the soldiers; and before we knew what had happened, they had clapped us into jail. Of course it was only for one night, for no one took us very seriously; but during that night I thought more about politics than I had ever thought before. And I saw what fools we were, to pick chestnuts out of the fire for the ungrateful. What else is social service but working without reward for someone else because he has told you, or educated you to believe, that it is your duty? But no man is ungrateful to himself; so I vowed that if I had anything more to do with patriotism, it would be in convincing others that patriotism was the service of my own ends. I have kept that vow.

"But Tiburcio's resentment was not against the politician but against the government that had imprisoned him; and as soon as he was released, instead of returning to college, he carried Gil away to join the usual dry-season revolution. It failed, and Tiburcio and Gil had to spend a few months in Nicaragua as *emigrados*. While they were there, they met a girl, the daughter of the governor of Jinotega, or somewhere. She was a pretty girl, large and silent and very gentle, not the least intelligent, but the sort of woman one loves for being a woman. That is greater than intelligence.

"Of course, they both loved her, and, of course, there was no doubt as to the outcome. Tiburcio assailed her heart and her parents. Gil merely talked gently to her about how great a man was Tiburcio; and she looked at Gil, at his beard and his broad shoulders, and listened as she would have listened, had he been talking Chinese to her. I think she loved Gil the more for his devotion to Tiburcio. She was one of those women so unintelligent as to fail to see Tiburcio's eyes and mustache and reputation. When Tiburcio asked for her hand, she refused him; but her family protested loudly, and Gil assured her that she would miss the happiness of life, so at length she assented.

"Some ten years later Tiburcio fought his way to the presidency. Gil commanded his army of the Atlantic coast and won the greater part of the battles. He was a master at collecting an army, Gil. Everyone trusted him, because he trusted Tiburcio so implicitly; and as he marched, the *pencos* picked up their machetes and followed behind him, vowing that his road should be their road, his enemies theirs. Mosquito Indians left their cassava, Caribs their fishing, sons of the country their corn patches, to follow Gil to victory.

"I saw him as he led his troops in triumph into the capital. He was mounted on my horse, yes, that horse. His smile was entangled in his black beard, his shirt was torn across one shoulder; there was a bullet hole in his felt hat. The cobbled street was alive with red flags waving for him, and everyone was shrieking, '*Viva, Villatoro!*'

Gil held up a hand and stopped them. '*Viva, Ulloa!*' he cried, and they shouted too, '*Viva Ulloa!*', because Gil had told them to. Then there was an election and Tiburcio was made president. (His mustache looked well on a placard.) Gil was appointed minister of war.

"FOR a few months Gil was kept busy, breaking up the remaining bands of blues. Then the country settled down again. Only the Indians of the mountains raided the neighboring valleys and called their plunderings by the name of revolution. So they have done forever. So they will do until they are extinct. Gil dropped into his work in the capital, content to be quiet. Every Sunday he visited Tiburcio at his house; and he gazed at his friend's wife, and she gazed at him. And he wished that he were married, and she wished that she were not, and both wondered why they should feel so much alone on Mondays. But neither of them ever thought of disloyalty. As I say, they were not intelligent.

"Tiburcio had a horse of which he was very proud. Its sire had been imported, I believe. Tiburcio used to boast that no horse in all Central America could pass him. Gil, because he was very heavy—nearly as heavy as I—rode what could carry him, this horse." Baca pointed across the yard with his lips. The stockman was bringing a bunch of green bananas to his horse, and the ungainly beast stretched out his camel-like neck and whinnied hungrily. I chuckled aloud at the thought of a minister of war astride of such a charger.

"That was Gil's horse," continued Baca, "and Gil loved him, for he was not married; had no family, no mistress, no dog. He had to love something. One day he and Tiburcio were riding outside the capital, and Tiburcio jeered at Gil's horse; as you are jeering at him now, my friend. Tiburcio was slightly out of temper, but he should not have been so unwise as to put Gil on the defensive. Gil flared up in championing his mount, said that no other horse in the country could carry him so well, that it was untiring; at last boasted that the ugly beast could out gallop any horse in the republic, a vaunt which he did not even believe, drawn from him in protecting the animal he loved. Instantly Tiburcio took him up on the boast and challenged him to race. Gil protested, for he knew that he had spoken foolishly, knew that Tiburcio's horse was better than his own, but Tiburcio pricked him venomously with his tongue and Gil flared up again. 'To the brewery, then,' he assented. 'Let us go!'

"The distance to the brewery was two miles, and the morning was scorchingly hot. How could a horse carry a man weighing eight *arrobas*, two hundred pounds, in such a race against a finely bred horse with a light rider? Before they clapped in their spurs, both knew that Gil was beaten. But Tiburcio was out of temper, and Gil was riding for his horses' sake, and the devil was mounted behind him. Tiburcio was in the lead, but Gil shouted in his horse's ear and flayed him with his quirt. The road was up hill and down dale, but the reins were slack on the horse's necks and they thundered down the stony slopes and snorted up the *cuestas*. Blood splashed the flanks of Gil's mount from where the spurs were raking, and Tiburcio's white coat was stained crimson by the spray from his horse's nostrils. Yet they were still close together. The brewery was in sight, and Gil was whooping at Tiburcio's heels. One last valley was before them; neither touched the reins; they set their teeth and plunged down. Now they were abreast, the horses snorting piteously under the strain. Now they faced the other hill, and the riders glared at each other as though they had been deadly enemies. Tiburcio's horse was sobbing horribly, for he had burst a small blood vessel in his lung. Gil's horse surged ahead. He was far in the lead when they tottered slowly past the brewery.

"No one recognized the president and the minister of war. Tiburcio's clothes were soaked with blood, and Gil was dripping with sweat. Suddenly Tiburcio's horse gave in and dropped, struggling and choking, showering blood from his nostrils. Without a word or a glance Tiburcio stepped out of the saddle and strode on down the street, slashing viciously at his leggings with his quirt. Gil dismounted and walked behind him, leading his limping horse. The groom came up at last and took the horse, and the two friends walked on in silence.

"Tiburcio was terribly angry, but Gil was only thinking dazedly. He was trying to realize that he had beaten Tiburcio, that it was possible to beat Tiburcio. The thought throbbed in his brain. For years he had relied upon Tiburcio's invincibility, and it had been untrue. Was his loyalty all foolishness, too? He was in a dream. But he did not hesitate. He knew that now it was his destiny to take back from Tiburcio all that he himself might have won, had he known. That night he raised the army against the government. Tiburcio fled to the Pacific coast to rally his supporters there.

"As I have said, Tiburcio was brilliant. It seemed impossible to fight against Gil's armament and popularity; but Tiburcio collected an army, harassed whole tribes of Indians into joining him in hope of loot, smashed armies time and again. It seemed possible that Tiburcio would win. But he never met Gil himself in battle.

"Gil left the capital to undertake personally the smashing of Tiburcio's forces. He brought with him only a small army from the capital, his intention being to join with his other forces in a great drive. One day he and his men stopped in a village to rest. They did not know that Tiburcio was in the hills above them. Suddenly he dropped upon them. As suddenly, Gil's troops swung into defense. The fight was fairly even. Tiburcio had the advantage of numbers, Gil of arms, and they were both great leaders.

"I have seen many battles, but never such a battle as that. Each side was confident of victory, so neither retired. It occurred to Tiburcio that if he could tempt Gil from the shelter of the *cuartel*, he might beat him. He feigned a retreat, and Gil and his men sallied out in pursuit. Suddenly the two armies shocked together in the open plaza. There was a storm of eleven millimetre bullets and the fight was over. Tiburcio was down.

"The firing ceased as Gil called off his men and ran to his enemy's side. Tiburcio had been shot through the lung; his eyes were wide and vague, and his mustache was stained with blood. And suddenly Gil realized what he had done, that he had slain his best friend in foolish rivalry. He dropped on his knees, sobbing, and lifted Tiburcio in his arms. Tiburcio clung to his hand, not knowing him, but holding to the living for fear of the death that was closing around him. He heard nothing of Gil's sobbing repentance, for life was fading in him and he felt it going. And in that last moment he thought not of his wife nor of his friends but only of the great dreams that he had dreamed, that now would never come true. And the pity and the horror of it.... So he died.

"Gil knelt there, everything forgotten, crying, 'Tiburcio, Tiburcio', softly, as though he could call back the dead. His servant came forward with his horse which reached out its head and nuzzled his shoulder; he looked up, crystal tears entangled in his beard. 'Shoot that horse!' he commanded, and turned again to Tiburcio. I followed the servant and bought the horse from him and rode homeward through the mountains."

"You were there?" asked Winter in surprise.

"I was with Tiburcio," said Baca simply. "I thought it best to be gone. Since then, the horse has been mine."

"What happened to Gil?" asked Heller. "He never became president."

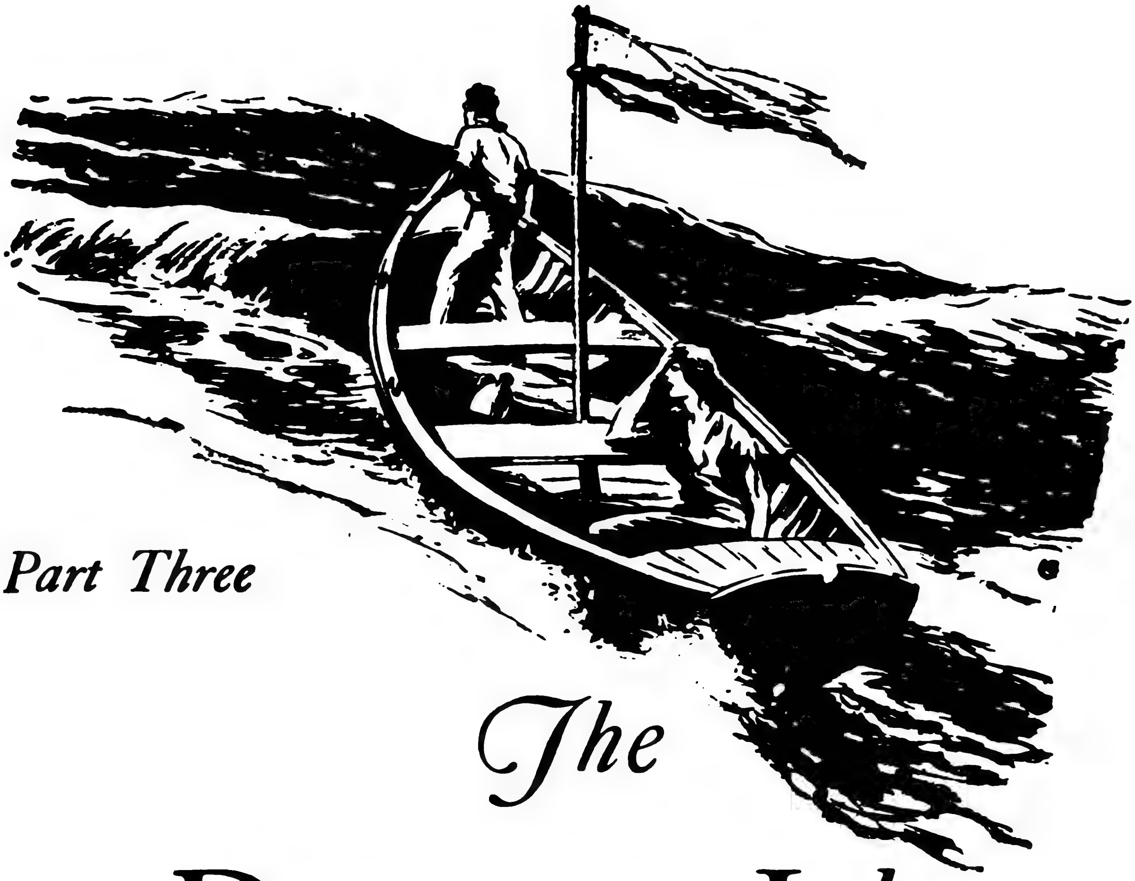
"The spirit had left him," Baca explained. "He dared not lead, with no Tiburcio to follow or to fight. He withdrew to his *hacienda* and Rivas was elected president. But Rivas knew that Gil was still powerful, still dangerous. One day he was found dead. . . ."

There was a silence. The bats scuffled about under the tin roof and squeaked thinly. One by one they launched themselves from the eaves and flittered away into the copper and blue sunset sky. I thought of Gil lying, on such a night as this, prone in the grass, his bearded face to the sky, a bullet in his back.

"And Tiburcio's wife?" asked Winter slowly. "Gil never went to her?"

Baca shrugged his heavy shoulders. "Gil never thought of her," he said. "She was only a woman, after all, and Tiburcio had been all the world to him. I believe she married again."

The mules drummed by on their way to the pasture, one stockman riding in front of them and whistling monotonously, one driving behind. We could see, above the small mules, the old bay horse, ewe-necked, rat-tailed, striding along with his battered old head in the air, remembering not at all the havoc that he had caused.



Part Three

The Dangerous Isles

A Romance of the South Seas

By BASIL CAREY

Preceding events briefly retold

For three days Morgan and Pettigrew, partners in a pearling expedition, had awaited the arrival of their other partner, Donovan, in his boat the *Spindrift*. They had sailed in the *Anna* to pick up divers and here, southeast of Amanu, Donovan was to have joined them with the stores and a chart of the island Taukura. Donovan had stumbled upon this island accidentally, found it had never been pearled, and made a chart showing its location and approach among the Dangerous Isles of the Southern Pacific.

Growing impatient at Donovan's tardiness, and each secretly worried because of it, they put about and made for Wakatea, the port where Donovan took on stores, hoping to pick him up on the way. They find his boat scuttled but kept awash by a ledge on which it had drifted. Donovan is in the deckhouse, knifed, a gold earring in his fingers. The chart is gone.

Pettigrew admits to Morgan that while last at Wakatea he mentioned he was going pearling on Taukura with Donovan. He had babbled this information while in his cups. They both feel sure that the only ones capable of attacking Donovan and stealing the chart are Stewart and his partner Lamotte—the latter they remember wears earrings much like that found clutched in Donovan's hand.

They go to Wakatea and get fresh supplies. Here their suspicions of Stewart are further confirmed. They find he sailed immediately after Donovan did and that he knew Donovan had a chart of Taukura. They also learn that Stewart and Lamotte headed for Kikia where they were to meet the latter's sister who was to arrive on the *Tahiti* mail boat. Morgan and Pettigrew sail with all haste to intercept Stewart. They arrive at Kikia and demand an explanation from Stewart but get no satisfaction. Lamotte, however, is plainly nervous and has a torn ear, which he claims to have received in a fight. With so little evidence they cannot drag Stewart and Lamotte into court, but plan to follow them. If Stewart goes to Taukura it will show them the way—which they cannot find without Donovan's chart—

and also prove that Stewart has the chart. Thus they hope to find the secret pearling ground and Donovan's murderer at the same time.

Stewart, fearing this, has a native waylay Morgan and Pettigrew and keep them doped for two days after he, Lamotte, and Lamotte's sister, Valerie, have sailed.

Valerie is fresh from New York and knows nothing of Stewart nor of her brother's participation in any wrong doing.

Stewart, Lamotte and Valerie, with Donovan's chart, reach Taukura unhindered by Morgan and Pettigrew. After a week's fishing they leave with some very fine pearls. Stewart has paid Valerie much attention and she is attracted by him.

Morgan and Pettigrew, feeling certain that Stewart will sell any pearls he may get at Taukura to Chang, lay off Paviete to intercept the *Swallow*. They finally sight her and make a night attack, boarding the *Swallow* from their longboat. During the confused fighting Pettigrew steals below and finds Valerie with Stewart's belt, containing the pearls, about her. They squabble, the light is knocked down and Valerie finally gets to the deck where Pettigrew catches her. Unable to unclasp the complicated buckle of the belt and afraid of interference by others, Pettigrew grabs her and jumps overboard. They are picked up by Morgan in the longboat and taken on board the *Anna*. The pearls are taken from Valerie and the *Anna* heads northward for Kikia where they intend to put Valerie ashore. During the fight the *Swallow's* steering gear was put out of commission so Morgan and Pettigrew feel safe from pursuit.

A squall hits the *Anna*, before they can take in sail or cut the halyards she is demasted. Some of the crew are washed overboard—Pettigrew is nowhere to be seen—the boat appears to be sinking. Morgan takes Valerie and puts out in the longboat.

The rising sun finds them both huddled in the bottom of the boat.

Farther north a fantastic hulk pitches and rolls alarmingly, wringing heartfelt curses from her steersman.

THE day wore on and presently the intense heat awoke Morgan. He sat up and looked around, with a feeling of sick dread at his heart. Valerie still slept, crouched in the scanty shelter which they had made. She tossed restlessly and her parched lips formed incoherent words. Something in the helplessness of her sleeping body caught at his heart. She looked very young, and for the first time a sense of her beauty awoke in him. Slowly, unwillingly, he admitted it, his eyes lingering on the pale oval of her face where the long thick lashes swept her cheeks. He wondered what there was between her and Stewart. Knowing the man he could guess Stewart's side, could tell accurately what his plans would be. But of Valerie's part he could tell nothing. What sort of woman hid behind that defiant mask? If she cared about Stewart—

He shrugged his shoulders. What did it matter, anyway?

He stood up, and searched the sunlit sea. His eyes were playing tricks and the hand which he lifted to shade them trembled. He sat down unsteadily. His mouth was dry and woolly, his throat ached, his tongue was like wood. Moving cautiously and with infinite care lest he should rouse the sleeping girl, he found the keg of water and moistened a piece of rag. This he sucked eagerly, chewing the bit of rag into a round hard pellet that he kept in his mouth to draw the saliva. He judged the time to be about noon and wondered dully whether it was the last noon he would know.

Valerie stirred and sat up. She raised her hands to her eyes and then cried out at the pain in her arms. They were bruised and stiff from the labor of the previous night.

"It'll pass," he assured her. "Rub them a bit, that's it."

He measured out her share of the water and she gulped it thirstily and waited for him to pour out his own.

"Aren't you going to have any?"

"I've had mine."

"We've not much left?"

"No."

"Have you seen any ships?"

"No."

She sat with her arms round her knees and regarded him thoughtfully.

"It looks—pretty rotten."

"It does."

"It's rather queer, isn't it?"

"What?"

"Why—all this. We two, who didn't know each other till a day or two ago—and look at us now!"

"Well?" he challenged.

"Nothing," she said, "only—it's queer."

He was turning over something in his mind. At last he said, "That fellow Stewart. Did you care about him?"

At his blunt question the fine color flooded her face.

"What can it matter to you?"

"It doesn't matter a bit," he assured her. "Mere curiosity, you know. Keep your head covered. I don't want you down with heat-stroke."

He thought. "She does care about the fellow. He's made up to her, I suppose." He felt a curious little stab of regret, which was odd, considering that she was nothing to him. Then his mind flew back to the needs of the hour. The interminable procession of doubts and hopes and fears began again. The spectres, that had vanished with the night's toil, came creeping back, jeering, mocking, pointing at him with fingers that trembled in the quivering heat. What would the next two days bring forth? And how would he and the girl live through them? The sun—the torturing pitiless sun—or the devouring sea—to one of them they must fall. Which would deal the death blow? Or would they join their stupendous forces to crush the life out of those two puny creatures who had defied them?

The day dragged on. Though they were consumed by a raging thirst Morgan would not touch the keg till sundown. The paintwork of the longboat was blistered almost out of existence. Under the naked hand the thwarts were intolerably hot. Morgan's body felt as though it had been beaten with rods. In all the world there was nothing left but endurance. He set his teeth and turned away from the watercask. It needed all his self-control to keep his hands off it. The vision of the cool water tempted him, taunting him with its nearness. He found himself twisting his fingers in a vain effort to keep them from reaching out towards the keg. He looked at Val, lying still as death in the stern sheets. Her crumpled attitude filled him with vague alarm. He reached out a hand and touched her. She moaned, but her eyes did not open.

Southward still they went, caught in the relentless grasp of the current. Morgan wondered whether they had swept past Paviete in the darkness of the night before. Was it only the night before? How many centuries had passed since then! All the days that had gone before were sunk in an immensity of Time. He looked back at them from an infinite distance. All the adventures of his life appeared incredibly insignificant. The hopes, the ambitions that had mastered him a month ago—where were they? Vanished, blown away like smoke before the one overwhelming desire for life itself.

WHEN evening came at last, bringing temporary relief, he stretched out unsteady hands to the watercask. He shook Val and she raised herself languidly, as he held the water to her lips. She sank back again and watched heavy-eyed while he drank his share. The sun went down and the tropic night began, mysterious, sinister. The two in the drifting boat said no word. Morgan strained his eyes in the darkness for some distant light. But none showed. The blackness of the night remained unbroken, impenetrable. He dozed and woke again after a maddening dream of an English river that bubbled and eddied over cool brown stones. He became aware of stifled sobbing.

"What is it?" he said.

There was no answer, but the muffled sounds went on, hopelessly, pitifully, till Morgan could bear it no more. He put out a groping hand and touched Val's shoulder.

"Don't howl. It's bad for your nerves."

"It's so dark," said Val.

He had to smile at that, a twisted smile that hurt his blistered lips.

"Don't give in," he said. "You've been damned plucky up to now. Look here, there's still a chance that we'll hit Paviete. It's a slim one, but still it's there. I'm not lying to cheer you up. Buck up, now."

A thought struck him.

"You're cold?"

"Not awfully."

The wind, and their nearness to the water, had effected a change in temperature that was disconcerting in its rapidity. A few hours before they had sweltered in the overpowering heat. Now they shivered in the night air. Val pulled her coat about her, but it was of little use.

"Sit close to me," said Morgan suddenly.

"No," she said, and he detected the hostility in her voice.

"Don't be a fool," he retorted.

He moved to the stern sheets and felt about in the darkness. She struggled in his grasp and beat at him with her hands, filled with panic at his nearness. He laughed at her and pulled her, still resisting, on to his knees, prisoning her in his arms, holding her fast.

"It's no use kicking," he said, "because you're as weak as a kitten. Keep still, I tell you. What does it matter if we hate each other? That's no reason why we shouldn't keep warm, is it? Haven't you any sense of humor?"

She lay quiet then, cradled in his arms like a rebellious child. Oddly stirred by her slim fragility, he held her as gently as a woman. Time slipped by, and presently he knew by her regular breathing that she slept. He dared not move his aching limbs for fear of disturbing her. Cramped as he was, he had a curious feeling of contentment. He found himself thinking about this slip of a girl. He remembered her fierce defiance of himself and Pettigrew on board the *Anna*. He thought of his irritation at her hostility, his determination to crush her obstinacy. She was plucky, he admitted, mindful of the way she had worked by his side in the perilous hours of the night before. Many women would have been useless, intolerable in their self-pity, their whining for help. There was none of that about Val. Unconsciously his hold tightened and she stirred, turning toward him, snuggling against him like a blind kitten in search of warmth. He smiled to think how angry she would have been if she knew the protective instinct that her helplessness aroused in him.

He found himself dozing fitfully, pursued by tormenting dreams. He had lost all count of time. The stars were out. Their aloofness seemed somehow to intensify the loneliness. What would the end be? Would he watch Val die? Or would he go out first and leave her to the terror of the sea? He shut his eyes again, refusing to think.

HE AWOKE suddenly with an uncanny and positive knowledge that something tremendous was happening. What could it be? Val still slept. The stars still shone. There was no change in the wind or in the steady rise and fall of the boat. What was it? He listened, scarcely daring to breathe. A sound—a new muffled sound, met his ears—the sound of waves breaking on a beach.

"God!" he said, "it's Paviete."

His words awoke Val. She yawned and struggled to a sitting position in his arms.

"Listen," he said in a thick, choked voice.

"What is it?"

"Can't you hear? A roaring. It's waves. Waves on a beach. It's Paviete."

Together they strained their eyes through the darkness. On the starboard bow they made out a shape, black against the stars. A trembling seized them, the trembling of those who are snatched from disaster. On and on went the little boat, till the mass of land loomed large and forbidding above them. Morgan lifted the cask and they swallowed what was left of the precious water. Val shuddered as she realized how little there was. The roar of the breakers sounded nearer.

A new terror gripped them.

"We're going past," said Morgan.

It was true. The current swept past the island about half a mile out. If they were to gain the shore there was not a moment to be lost. But what chance was there in a rudderless boat?

"We'll have to swim."

With feverish alacrity they made ready. Morgan took Valerie's coat, folded it longwise and pushed it through his belt at the back. In hurried sentences he explained to her that she was to hang on to the coat with one hand and swim with the other. He dared not risk losing touch with her.

"It's the last chance," he told her. "Now then, the gunwale. Stand firm on it. That's right. Give me your hands."

He lifted her over the side into the darkness of the water. She gave a little gasp as the coldness closed over her. In an instant he had leapt in beside her. He waited till he felt her pull on the coat, then struck out for the mainland.

He had not reckoned on the strength of the current. At first it seemed that they would be swept after the boat. Inch by inch they battled their way. Weakened as they were by exposure and hunger, the task seemed beyond their strength. Morgan's great arms rose and fell. He tried trudgeon stroke at first, but it wearied him and little progress was made. Breast stroke served them better. Bit by bit they forced their way out of the current. Before they were finally free of it they had been swept the length of the island. Paviete lay now to the northwest, and Morgan's heart failed him. Would they reach it? He gathered all his strength in one final burst of energy. Like a man possessed he cleft his way through the water. Nearer and nearer loomed the rocks.

"Kick!" shouted Morgan in an agony. "Kick out hard!"

She heard him and strove to respond. But she was too spent. Her body dragged after his like a log. He felt her slipping, slipping from him. In a last effort he turned on his back, hooking his feet under her armpits. So burdened he struggled on toward the dim beach, his arms thrashing through the water like flails. Nearer and nearer grew the faint blur of sand. He trod water repeatedly, steadying Val with his hands. At last he felt the firm sand beneath his feet. The waves broke over them again and again as he dragged her through the shallow water. Finally a comber picked them up and flung them sprawling on the beach. With the last of his strength Morgan staggered into safety with his burden. He dropped where he stood, one arm stretched protectively across Valerie.

Till dawn he lay there like a log.

CHAPTER X

CHANG sat in his great chair and watched the *Swallow* limping into Paviete harbor.

He was very fat, with an unwrinkled yellow face and little slanting eyes where the devil lurked. Heavy nostrils and thick pale lips told a tale of their own. His massive body was clothed in a loose robe of exquisite yellow silk, worked with a design of peacock's feathers. Round his body was a crimson sash, very wide and bright. His feet were thrust into heelless slippers of dyed woven grass. In one hand he held a little fan of ivory lace work that fluttered continually to and fro. He spoke English well, in a deep throaty voice whose intonation never altered. He was courteous in the extreme, with a remote impersonal graciousness that was exceedingly impressive. He quoted Confucius admirably. His gods were faithfully served. During a long and adventurous career he had committed most of the known varieties of crime and invented a few more.

Behind him stood Ah Foo, holding an umbrella of plaited straw above his master's head. He was a slender man with a blank expressionless face. His slanting eyes flickered now and then at some remark of Chang's, but he spoke rarely. He was obedient and unquestioning and dependable and Chang had stolen his wife. When Ah Foo found out he said nothing. But his strange eyes with their odd flicker watched his master unceasingly. Something in that stare should have warned Chang. But it did not.

The entire native population had gone out to welcome the *Swallow*. Their crazy catamarans swarmed about her like flies. From afar the sound of their cries thrummed through the sweltering air. Chang rose leisurely and went to meet the two white men. They came slowly across the beach, their feet clinging to the sand in the way of men who had not felt solid ground for many days. It was Stewart who called out, "How goes it, Chang?"

Chang bowed. Not even with intimates did he relax his stately manners.

"My house and its unworthy contents are at your feet," he said.

"Thanks. Look here, we're in for repairs. The stearing gear's been bashed about and it's taken the devil of a time to get here. Can you send out a couple of men to see to it?"

Chang spoke rapidly to Ah Foo, and that worthy padded away, running in a half trot, his bare feet noiseless as a cat's. Stewart sank down under a palm and tilted his hat over his eyes.

"When I was whaling down South Georgia way," he remarked, "I said I'd prefer hell, because it would be warmer. Well, I've changed my mind."

"South Georgia?"

"Yes, down in the South Polar regions. Don't ever go, Chang."

"I didn't know you'd been a whaler," said Lamotte.

"I've been most things," retorted Stewart, opening one eye. "It only wants a little imagination and unbounded cheek to be anything you like."

CHANG sat by, smiling, his little fan waving unceasingly.

"Many suns have set since you paid last honorable visit."

"Well, we've been busy," explained Stewart. "For one thing, there was the Fergusson affair. It took a long time."

He plunged into details and Chang listened, nodding his head gravely.

"And now you have finished that?"

"Yes."

Stewart paused, and caught Lamotte's eye.

"In the time of drought the river runs slowly," he said, and Chang's smile widened.

"We will go to the despicable dwelling of this person," he suggested. "It may be we find something to cure your throat-drought."

He rose ponderously and led the way to his house, a long one-storied building that lay back from the sea in a grove of palms. They entered a cool, darkened room, empty save for a divan and a few coloured mats that gleamed on the hard earth floor. At one end, on a raised dais, stood an image of Buddha, carved out of white jade. It was a thing of exquisite beauty, the work of a master craftsman. Before it lay an offering of blood red hibiscus flowers.

"Where'd you buy that jade?" asked Stewart as they came in.

"Bangkok. The seller stands in market-place and all people who wish to buy jade come close. They do not speak—no. Each mouth is silent as the river in frozen winter. Then the seller holds out his arm—so. All who wish to buy, seize it. Each grip has a secret price-meaning. To the one who offers most the seller will speak. It is all secret. None knows what money is offered. Only the seller knows, by the grip of the fingers on his arm."

"Well, it's a fine bit of work," appraised Lamotte. "One day someone will steal it."

"This person does not think so."

"Has anyone ever tried?" inquired Stewart curiously.

"Once—he died," said Chang.

He clapped his hands and ordered whisky to be brought. Throughout the ceremony of pouring and tasting and drinking of healths he was urbane and unimpeachable in his politeness. Yet he disturbed Lamotte. Lamotte was fascinated, unwillingly, by this suave Chinese gentleman. What was there sinister about him that roused a feeling akin to fear? Lamotte twisted his glass uneasily, perplexed, baffled by his own fears. Why should he suddenly think of Donovan sliding into a limp heap in the deckhouse of the ill-fated *Spindrift?*

"WE'VE had bad luck," Stewart was saying as he lifted his glass to the light. "Damn bad luck, Chang. You've heard of Taukura? No, I hadn't either until a couple of months ago. It's a hundred miles from any trade route and you'd never find it without a chart."

"You had a chart?"

"Yes. There's just one chart in existence. Donovan—you knew Donovan—he ran across the island by accident. It was he who made the chart."

"And gave it to you?"

"Not exactly," admitted Stewart. "Anyway, we got it. And we made for Taukura, and prospected for pearls."

"Pearls."

"We found them. They're wonderful. I've handled some topnotchers in my time, but none so fine as these. Well, they've gone. Morgan—you remember Donovan's pal, Morgan—well, when he got wise to our little voyage, he guessed what was on the mat. Well, he's got the pearls—and the girl."

"Girl?" echoed Chang.

Bit by bit the story was pieced together, and Chang listened attentively.

"And so you go north to capture vile thief?" said he, when the tale was told. "Morgan is very strong. You will not break him. The young pine sways in the storm, but it does not snap—unless the trunk has been sawn."

"Meaning, I suppose, that it'll take a bit of doing," said Lamotte. "*Dieu!* let me get at him. We shall see!"

But Chang was looking at Stewart, and watching the queer gleam in his eyes. When Lamotte had strolled outside to smoke and see what Ah Foo had to say about the steering gear, Chang said sharply, "This girl—you want her, eh?"

"She's damn fine," said Stewart. "Cold as ice, though. Different from most women. Kiss 'em rough enough and they're yours, as a general rule. This one wasn't. Couldn't quite make her out. Yes, I reckon I want her all right."

"And Morgan?"

Stewart scowled.

"She won't fall for Morgan. And he—why, women are no more to him than cold mutton."

Chang raised his eyebrows.

"The heart of an enemy is a dim forest," he murmured.

THERE was a pause. The roar of the sea came faintly to their ears. They heard the moan of the rising wind in the palm trees. A boy was crooning a little tune outside the house. The notes went up and down, up and down, in plaintive monotony. Lamotte's tall shadow went by. There was a curse, a sudden wail, and the little tune ended abruptly.

"Lamotte's all nerves since—since Donovan," said Stewart. "He's a useless fool, except for his muscle. Sometimes I think I'll chuck him."

Chang nodded understandingly and asked:

"When you obtain the pearls, where will you take them?"

Stewart's lids drooped.

"New York, I think. To Rosenbaum."

"A very great man, the honorable Rosenbaum?" Chang murmured.

Stewart chuckled.

"Great man, if you like, but hardly honorable, Chang. He'd be tickled to death to hear you. He's a rogue, a cute rogue. But he pays well. Oh, he pays very well. He can afford it. You remember the fuss about the Courtney diamonds? He cleared fourteen thousand dollars over that. Then there was the MacAlister affair. The Macalister jewels were locked up all the time in Rosenbaum's little safe—the one that's hidden in the wall of the parlor. He had a narrow shave once. I was there and saw it. Two years ago there was a hue and cry about a pair of diamond earrings. Somehow the police had got wind. Rosenbaum was at breakfast when the scout came in and warned him the 'tecs were outside.

"Well, he had the earrings in his pocket. I tell you, I was in a sweat. 'Go while the going's good,' I told him. But he shook his head. There was a pot of raspberry jam on the table. . . . Well, the 'tecs stayed two hours. They broke open every box and pried up the stair carpet. There wasn't a cushion or a chair-seat that wasn't ripped to bits. Rosenbaum gave 'em a run for their money. He'd go and stand in front of some box and beg them not to open it. When they did, they'd find just trash. The third time he did it they started getting flustered. They were dead sure the earrings were somewhere, and they meant to get them, but they couldn't stand being made to look like fools. They searched him and they searched me and a fresh fool of a sergeant searched a 'tec by mistake, thinking he was an accomplice. It was noon when they cleared out, looking tired and swearing they'd get us all yet. When they'd gone, Rosenbaum put two fingers into the pot of raspberry jam and lifted out the earrings. Oh, he's got his wits about him, has Rosenbaum."

"And you propose to offer him the wonderful pearls of Taukura?" remarked Chang conversationally.

"Perhaps," replied Stewart.

"You have not decided, then?"

"Rosenbaum would pay well."

"It is many days' journey to New York."

Stewart shrugged his shoulders. Chang's gaze wandered to the Buddha, immutable in its cold loveliness, staring with sightless eyes across the darkening room.

"SUPPOSING," he said. "that the pearls were brought to this person in preference to the distant and discredited Rosenbaum, the matter of a certain debt might be consigned into the oblivion of forgetfulness."

"Indeed?"

"Yes."

Stewart began to walk up and down, frowning thoughtfully. Presently he stopped and stood looking fixedly at Chang's inscrutable yellow face.

"You're serious?"

Chang nodded.

"Will you write it down?" asked Stewart abruptly.

"No."

He continued to smile blandly at the other's disappointment.

"You do not trust me?"

"Why should I?" said Stewart.

Chang shrugged his shoulders.

"There is no reason."

"Trust!" burst out Stewart angrily. "Is there any one of us that trusts the other?"

He flung outside in a rage, and discovered Lamotte lounging moodily against the wall.

"Well?"

"It's not well. The slippery old brute says he'll call off that debt if I fetch him the pearls. But he won't write it down. I know what he'll do. When I bring him the pearls he'll—"

"You haven't got 'em yet," Lamotte reminded him.

Stewart's mouth took an ugly curve.

"But I shall."

He walked away, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, his head high. Lamotte watched him go, and frowned. There were times when he hated Stewart; hated him with the impotent, unreasoning hatred of a weak man. He was jealous of the power that Stewart had over himself, over Chang, over Valerie. Often he planned to end it. In imagination he saw himself towering over Stewart, thrashing him, beating him to pulp, showing him at last who was the better man. How many sneers, how many insults, had he endured without lifting a finger! Why? In the name of fortune, why? What was it in Stewart's look that held him back, kept him at bay, not daring to spring?

"The time will come."

Lamotte spun round. He had not heard Chang's approach. It was to him a matter of constant marvel that a man of such vast bulk should move so quietly.

"What do you mean?" he stammered.

"My honorable friend should take care that he speaks only with the mouth and not with the eyes," commented Chang.

At sundown Stewart came back, still morose. Chang ignored him and talked affably to Lamotte over a meal of Kiva-fish, scented rice and baked yams. There was *trepang*, too, but only Chang partook of it. Ah Foo waited on them deftly, patiently, watching them from under his drooping lids, his slanting eyes wandering ever and again to his master's face. Outside the girls were calling softly to each other in the velvet darkness. Through the open window came the thousand scents of the tropic night. Along the shadowy beach the moonlight lay in great pools.

Inside the hot room the four men watched each other with veiled glances. In the eyes of each burned contempt for the other three, contempt superb, immeasurable.

WHEN Morgan came to himself again the sun was high, and Valerie was sitting in a despondent attitude, her head bent, her arms clasped about her knees. She looked pale and heavy eyed. Morgan lay still and traced with his eyes the curve of her body against the sky. She had spread her coat on the sand to dry, and it flapped restlessly, baked by the sun and the hot white sand. The roar of the sea sounded like the dull booming of distant guns. She was not looking at the sea nor the sand nor the burning sky. Some hidden trend of thought made him say aloud, "It's not my fault."

She said, without even turning her head, "What does it matter whose fault it is that we're in this hole?"

But he persisted.

"You think I'm to blame?"

She was silent.

"You do," he said finally. At that she looked round at last and he saw the hostility in her eyes.

"You hate me as much as that?" he asked, in spite of himself.

"Hate you?" she echoed bitterly. "What else is there for me to do?"

He said no more then, but rose stiffly, shouting at the pain in his limbs, and went off to look for cocoanuts. When he came back she was still sitting where he had left her. He broke a nut carefully and handed it to her.

"Don't spill the milk," he warned her, "and don't eat too much of the nut for a time. If you do, you'll be sick."

They ate and drank in silence, their faces turned towards the sea. Morgan was busy considering ways and means. Paviete was an oddly shaped island with great gullies that cut deep into the coast. The harbor lay on the north side. This meant that the whole width of the island lay between the little village and themselves. It would be best to cut straight across. The coast route would doubtless be easier, but it would take much longer. Morgan determined to strike due north and push on across the island. He guessed that Valerie's strength was pretty nigh exhausted. His own limbs ached painfully and there was a dull throbbing at the back of his head. He told Val his plans. She heard him out in silence.

"It'll be quicker," he urged. "I don't know the island well, but I've seen some of the gullies. They're huge. It would take us about three times as long to go by the coast."

"You think it better to go straight through the interior?"

"Yes."

She looked doubtfully at the rising ground behind them.

"It's pretty hilly."

"It is. But that can't be helped. If there are hills there are sure to be valleys."

Still she hesitated.

"You don't want us to go that way?" he asked. "Well, we're going, whether you like it or not. And God help us to hit the other side alive. Come, get up."

He pulled her to her feet. She gave a little cry, but he took no heed. He turned his face towards the hilly ground that marked the interior of the island and soon he heard her behind him, limping a little, catching her breath sharply as though she were crying. Their way lay through a grove of cocoanut palms. Many of these trees lay on the ground, a prey to the violent winds that swept the island.

THE land rose steadily, and after an hour's march they rested and looked back over the tops of the palms to sea far below. The roar of the breakers came faintly and the wide beach seemed but a strip of sand. They lay motionless, too tired to speak, till Morgan gave the signal to go on. The palms grew scarcer, and instead there were strange stunted growths, half bushes, half trees, with long claw-like branches where great scarlet flowers clung, like clots of blood. There was no path. The ground was covered with a twisting creeper that tripped the feet. Up and up they went, until the air grew cooler and the sound of the sea died. The palm trees had ceased altogether, and Morgan carried five cocoanuts to serve for a meal later on. The queer shapes of the stunted trees amused Val at first. She gave a tired little ripple of laughter when they came across one that resembled an elephant, complete with tail and trunk, and a red flower that might have been an eye. But presently she stopped smiling. The wind had ceased, and a brooding silence lay over the place. There was something sinister in the warped shapes, as if nature in an ugly mood had set out to torture something alive, crucified it, and left it to rot. For none of the trees were alive. Only the huge blood red blossoms lived, flaunting triumphantly among the dead trees.

Sorefooted, the two pushed on. They were making for the crest of a ridge. The creeping plant that covered the hillside like a mat gave way to a tufted weed that had sticky leaves which clung to their shoes. Tiny green beasts, something like lizards, basked on these flat leaves, scuttling away before Morgan's shadow. They came to a clump of little bushes that bore a bluish colored fruit, shaped like a raspberry. Val picked some. Morgan saw her sniffing at it curiously.

"What are you doing?"

"They smell like bilberries," she told him. "I wonder if they're any good to eat."

"Throw them away," he said instantly.

She paid no heed. He walked up to her and seized her wrist. The next moment the berries lay scattered on the ground.

"You little fool," he said, and walked on again.

They reached the top of the ridge at last and looked down into the valley. Val turned white, and a fit of trembling seized her.

"I can't go down," she whispered.

With an effort, Morgan mastered his distaste of what lay before them.

"You must," he said, but he made no effort to move.

The valley was about six miles across. It was a huge basin-shaped depression covered with skull-shaped lumps of a porous substance, curiously brittle. At the top of the slope grew stunted trees, flabby sapless things over which trailed masses of grey lichen, choking them, making the fantastic shapes a thousand times more weird. The uncanny stillness gave to the place an air of death, of slow decay, that was horrible. In the centre of the valley there gleamed the steel colored water of a lake, stagnant, motionless. From its banks rose little patches of misty vapor that crawled about the slope like ghosts before they melted into nothing. Over the whole place brooded a gray air of indefinable horror.

"I can't go down there," said Val again.

SHE turned swiftly and ran madly, panic-stricken, anywhere away from the haunted valley. But she did not get far. Morgan leapt after her and caught her savagely by the arm. In vain she bit and struggled. He pulled her back to the top of the slope and forced her to look again at the sinister lake and the creeping patches of mist. She tugged away like a mad thing, uttering queer gasping sounds, but he would not let go. She screamed at last, and the sound shattered the silence and came echoing back from the hills.

"No," she was saying. "No, no, no. I'd rather die—let's go back—I can't go down there. I can't, I can't!"

For answer he gripped both her wrists with an iron hand, and stepped forward, dragging her after him. Under their feet the skull-shaped lava crumbled with a sickening crackle. The clinging lichen caught their hair with ghostly fingers. Val stumbled forward, dumb with terror induced by the grayness, the unutterable stillness. Morgan ploughed on doggedly in the blind fashion of a man in a nightmare. Progress was slow and difficult, but he dared not stop. If he did he knew that it would be the end. On and on they went, plunging forward into the dreary waste. The sun beat down pitilessly. Morgan had torn out the sleeves of Val's coat and fashioned rough head-coverings for the two of them. These scanty make-shifts kept the fiercest rays from their heads and necks.

They came to a bare patch of oozy mud. Morgan kicked a stone into the middle of it. In less than a minute it sank, sucked under by the treacherous ooze. Morgan shuddered, and hoped Val had not seen. He became aware that her sobs had ceased and that she was toiling after him with less resistance. He looked at her feet. Her thin shoes were cut to pieces and the blood ran as she walked.

Without a word he lifted her up, setting her astride his hips in the way the Kanaka women carry their children. Mechanically her ankles crooked round his waist and her hands gripped his shoulder. He put an arm round her to steady her and turned his face to the northward.

Afterwards, they could never decide how long it took them to reach the beginning of the further slope. Nor could either of them remember how they had fought the last bit of the way. Heaven and earth melted away, and life itself became a vast monotony of endurance.

Three times they encountered the bare patches of mud, and were forced to make wide detours. At last they began the ascent of the further slope. They paused a moment before tackling it and a fragment of mist from the lake came swirling about them, bringing with it an odor of decay that turned Val sick.

"Buck up," said Morgan, "we're nearly through."

She slipped to the ground.

"I'll walk," she told him.

He looked at her with a hint of admiration. But Val, ashamed of her recent panic, refused to meet his eyes. She plodded after him, trying not to see the vast desolation that engulfed them, keeping her eyes fixed steadily on the figure that toiled ahead of her. Her limbs ached and her feet seemed made of lead. To move one before the other was a monstrous task, needing intense concentration. When they had gone a hundred yards Morgan turned round and said, "You mustn't walk any farther. I'd forgotten your feet. They're awfully sore now." The sweat was pouring from his white face, his eyes were dull and sunken, but he lifted her again and she made no remonstrance.

ON AND on they went, Morgan's feet crushing down the lava skulls, his brain fighting down fear and thirst and the intolerable heat. He lost all sense of time, moving forward with the dumb patience of a goaded ox set on an endless trail. The lichen-covered trees stretched out their puny arms to entangle him. He crashed through them, and the rotten wood snapped against his body with a noise of bullets.

The slope grew rapidly steeper as he neared the top, and the lava slipped under his feet, dragging him back with it, so that he lost nine or ten yards. When this happened for the second time, Val said weakly, "Put me down." She slid to the ground and on hands and knees began to crawl over the lava. Morgan followed suit. Up and up they went, slipping often, sprawling forward again, gasping, sweating, lost in an agony of endurance. Up and up, through pain and the torturing heat, till they reached the top of the slope. Over the crest they dragged themselves, with a last shuddering glance at the valley, and flung themselves down to rest, exhausted, beaten.

Morgan broke the last cocoanut, and they shared the milk in it. For nearly an hour they lay still, spent and worn with the perils they had vanquished.

The sun was setting. Beneath them the slope rolled northwards towards a distant cluster of buildings that was the village of Paviete. Morgan rose unsteadily, his eyes on the forest through which they must pass. Who could tell what terrors it held? He looked anxiously at Val's pale face.

"No good trying it to-night. Too late," he told her. "We'll wait till to-morrow now."

She suffered him to cover her carefully with what remained of her riding coat. The sea wind blew freshly at that height and she was glad of the scanty shelter that the coat afforded. She curled into it and fell instantly into the sound dreamless sleep of utter physical exhaustion. Morgan sat and watched the stars come out. Far off, twinkling lights shone in the village. From the woods near by came a sound of some animal rooting up the ground with little stertorous grunts. A pig, probably, wandering away from the village. Presently the noise ceased and there was no sound but the mysterious rustle of leaves in the darkness.

CHAPTER XI

AT DAWN the *Swallow* sailed and Chang stood on the beach watching her get under way. A fresh breeze bellied our her canvas, and she was off like a graceful bird. Stewart had gone away sulky and dissatisfied. Chang knew it. His little slanting eyes had seen the look on Stewart's face. What he had not seen was a certain encounter between Stewart and Ah Foo, late the night before. Ah Foo had come sidling to Stewart and muttered a few words.

"Watch him," Stewart whispered in fierce undertones, "watch him."

That was all. With all his astuteness, Chang had never realized that Ah Foo regarded his master with a hatred that was a devouring passion. Many moons had passed since he had stolen the woman whom Ah Foo loved. Almost, he had forgotten the episode. After all, there are many women in the world, especially in China.

"Honorable Stewart has gone away with huge displeasure," he observed aloud. "But what was this person to do? Pearls . . . yes, but the pearls are at this moment in the sinewy hands of an unworthy individual named Morgan, whose strength is proverbial. Should Stewart wrest the pearls from him and bring them to Paviete, the remission of his debt shall be considered. Till then—"

He shrugged his fat shoulders.

"Rosenbaum," he mused, "who is this despicable Rosenbaum that he should receive the pearls?"

"Yet he may do so," ventured Ah Foo.

Chang regarded him with a look of supreme contempt.

"He will not."

He smiled, a cunning smile that revealed how completely he had gauged Stewart's state of mind. He knew that if Stewart got the pearls, he would bring them to Paviete. In his own mind he had settled the price he would offer and the price he would give. No doubt the pearls would not prove so fine as Stewart portrayed them. In that case, the matter of the debt would remain unsettled. There would be no documents, reflected Chang, no documents to speak of promises made and forgotten.

He went into the low white house, past the playing fountain and the thin sweet chiming of the wind bells. Ah Foo brought him food, and he ate ruminatively of a dish composed of rice, diced pork, and chicken's liver, the whole carefully seasoned with soy and garnished with slices of sweet orange. Ah Foo stood by, watching him, fluttering a carved ivory fan lazily up and down. Ever and again their eyes turned seaward, where, through the iron barred window they could still see the *Swallow*, smaller and smaller in the distance. The saffron sky changed to deep cloudless blue. It began to grow hot.

Chang finished at last and sauntered outdoors. At the back of the house the ground rose sharply. A rough pathway led steeply upwards among the trees. The Kanakas used it on their copra expeditions. As a rule, they would not go very far towards the interior. Their fear of the Haunted Valley held them back. Once a year they ventured near the dreaded spot. For three days and three nights they stayed on the crest of the ridge that overlooked the depression. Strange sounds filtered down the hill to Chang's ears on these occasions. There were fires that burnt continually, and flying figures that leapt over the flames. What happened he could only surmise. He knew that the orgies represented homage to Puea, god of the island, who slept beneath the stagnant lake. Songs of praise were sung and prayers offered that Puea might sleep soundly, never wakening to scorch them with his fires.

Not all those who went up the hill came down again.

ONE year a servant of Chang's, named Ah Sing, had followed far off, hoping to get a glimpse of the mysteries. Next day a palm leaf was laid outside Chang's door. On it were two eyeballs and a tongue, lately the property of Ah Sing. Chang viewed the cryptic gifts in silence. Since that time no one had attempted to probe the mysteries of the worship of Puea.

Someone was coming down the path. Chang's eyes narrowed suddenly, and he thrust his head forward to obtain a better view. Who was it that stumbled so blindly carrying something, someone, in his arms? The man stood still for a moment, rocking drunkenly, as he tried to get his bearings. Then he came lurching on again. Something that was almost an expression of surprise flitted across Chang's imperturbable face. Was it, could it be — Morgan?

At that moment Ah Foo came running. He had seen the stranger. Together they waited. A few curious Kanakas crept near them, alarmed by the approach of these two who came down the rocky path.

To Morgan they seemed a blurred mass from which innumerable eyes watched him. As he struggled towards them, he was aware of only one sensation, relief. It seemed incredible that at last he could rest, could lie down and sleep without fear. All the torments of the past days rose up and overwhelmed him in a flood of weary remembrance. These silent staring people meant food and safety. His heart went out to them in a rush of gratitude. He tried to shout a welcome to them. Food and rest and safety.

Across his tired brain a sudden thought cut like a whip. Chang! What fool would hope for rest and safety on Paviete? Yes, there was the fat yellow face with its little slanting eyes. He could see it quite clearly now, apart from the rest of the silent group, watching him impassively. The need for caution lashed his consciousness into activity. He must keep his wits about him.

Gently he set Valerie on her feet. She kept hold of his arm, vaguely alarmed at the sight of the silent watchers. Her eyes wandered from Ah Foo to Chang. There they rested, fascinated, held.

"Welcome," said Chang with dignity. "If you will condescend to enter my worthless and obscure dwelling, all its miserable contents are yours."

He preceded them and the little procession followed him. By now the spell over the Kanakas was broken and they talked shrilly, pointing and gesticulating as they told each other of the two white people who had escaped the clutches of Puea. They watched, wondering, as Morgan and Valerie disappeared inside Chang's house, with Ah Foo following close behind.

CHANG ordered food to be brought, rice, fish and goats' milk. While they ate, in ravenous silence, he took stock of them. Morgan was in rags, but he still had his knife, though Chang noted with satisfaction the absence of a gun at his belt. That belt. . . . Looking up, he caught Ah Foo's eye. The latter nodded slightly. Chang knew he was not mistaken. It was Stewart's belt and the pearls were there, his for the taking. For an instant a look of triumph leapt into his eyes. He quenched it instantly. Only Ah Foo saw it.

Presently, when the meal was over, and the color had crept back into Valerie's face, Chang began a tentative conversation.

"There has been an accident?"

"A storm," said Morgan. "We have come from the south side. The *Anna* is lost."

"Indeed," murmured Chang. "And your two friends?"

Morgan thought: Then he doesn't know about Donovan; he hasn't seen Stewart.

"Gone," he said aloud.

"And the cargo," pursued Chang regretfully. "All lost, of course?"

"All lost."

"You were perhaps coming from Paraba?" said Chang conversationally. "I remember that you called there once for copra. Is it not so?"

"Maybe," returned Morgan, laconically.

Chang's eyes fell benevolently on Valerie.

"Doubtless the honorable lady has suffered many privations," he remarked. "Is it not so?"

Some warning stirred in Morgan's brain.

"This is my wife," he said quickly. Val made a startled movement. It did not escape the watching eyes.

"Your felicity must be exceptional," commented Chang. "Rarely have I seen such beauty, such exquisite coloring and perfect features."

Valerie blushed, but Morgan, aware of the formal nature of the compliment, remained unmoved. It was as if someone were tapping out a code signal at the back of his brain— "Look-out—look-out—look-out."

"When can we get away?" asked Morgan. "I mean, when does the Tahiti schooner come in?"

"She is due in three days," said Chang.

"You must be glad when the schooner comes," said Val, in an effort to be polite.

Chang smiled.

"You think perhaps that I am lonely? Madam, a Chinese gentleman is never lonely. The English look at our race with prejudiced and, forgive me, ignorant eyes. Their conception of us is that we are a nation of thieves, backward, uncivilized. By uncivilized they mean unwesternized. In their opinion, a people whose vices differ from their own must be barbarians. Their idea of us is drawn from the fanciful writings of Englishmen who understand us not at all. I myself have lived in England, and I know. The English have no brains. They have only their wits."

"I am not English," said Val quickly.

"It is possible that you are French?"

"Why?"

"Only a Frenchwoman can sustain a shipwreck and preserve her appearance," said Chang, affably.

MORGAN frowned. He got up stiffly and went to the barred window. Chang's eyes followed every movement.

"You would like to sleep," he murmured. "And madam is overcome with fatigue. It is not many people who dare to cross the island as you have done. The natives are aghast at your honorable courage."

"It was pretty rotten," Val admitted.

"You came through the Haunted Valley?"

"I suppose that place was the valley. It is covered with queer shaped stones that break. Lava, I suppose?"

Chang nodded.

"The island is volcanic, but the eruptions have ceased these many moons. Not even Kuna, the oldest man, can remember them. The crater is dead. But the natives still worship the fire god, Puea. They say that he was a mighty eater in his time, and devoured thousands. In proof of this there remain the skulls that he has spat out of his mouth. A superstitious people! Yes."

"But not dangerous?"

"I have never enquired," said Chang with the air of one who discovers a lapse in his own conduct. "Few people are dangerous, madam, unless they are possessed by greed or the desire for revenge. Confucius remarks that these two passions are most to be feared. They wreak the greatest havoc in a man. In their wake follows destruction, inevitable, inescapable."

For the fraction of a second his eyes rested on Morgan. In their depths lay menace, the shadow of warning. Val did not see. She was enraptured by the jade Buddha. She went and stood before its sculptured loveliness.

"You admire it?" came Chang's voice.

"It's beautiful," she said.

"It is as beauty should be, cold and aloof," he returned. "Touch it, handle it, grow familiar with it, and you will lose it. That is what the Western people do not understand."

Valerie swayed a little with weariness. Morgan went to her and held her by the arm.

"Doubtless an apartment is prepared for you by this time," said Chang. "Ah Foo is overseeing the preparations."

AT HIS words a door in the wall slid back, showing Ah Foo bowing and disclosed a dimly lit room. In it could be seen a low divan and some silken cushions. The walls were bare, and there was but one window, high up and barred. Chang led the way. In a corner stood a yellow Chinese vase where the waxen blooms of swamp-lilies showed ghostly in the faint light. Val exclaimed at their pale purity.

"They grow in a marsh hidden in the woods," said Chang, indifferently. "The Pavietans say they spring from the body of a woman who was drowned in the marsh while escaping from the fire god. Now you will rest here in peace. There is a gong hanging on the wall. Strike it if you desire anything."

He went out, and Ah Foo followed, sliding the door shut after him. They sat down, and Chang began to talk while Ah Foo listened attentively. It was now high noon and the sun burned fiercely. On the coolest side of the house was a wide door. Presently Ah Foo slid this open. Above the window that looked seaward was a blind. It was but natural that he should pull this down to shut out the heat. Chang paid no heed.

But the blind shut out more than the heat. It shut out the sight of the sea and of a stout catamaran which twelve Kanakas pulled lustily to the north. They were straining every nerve to catch up with the *Swallow* that had five hours' start. Ah Foo it was who had sent them, bidding them not return without the boat they had been sent to recall. They had a message to deliver. "Come back, Morgan is here." At last Ah Foo's waiting time was over. His smoldering hatred had leaped into a quick flame of action.

Later, when the air grew cool, he drew up the blind. There was no sign of the catamaran.

WHEN the door closed behind Ah Foo, Valerie sank down on the divan. Her face was flushed and angry.

"How dared you say I was your wife?"

She was furious. Morgan hushed her quickly.

"Don't shout. Do you want them to hear you? I had to say it. We're in a tight corner. Chang knows something. I don't like his look."

"Why did you let him shut us in here? It's like a prison?"

"What else could I do? He's only got to lift his finger and he'd have the whole island at our throats. At mine, anyway."

"You needn't have said I was your wife."

"Chang likes white women," said Morgan, bluntly. "If he thinks you're my wife, he may hesitate to—to touch you. Is that plain enough?"

She shrank back, appalled at the vision his words called up. The color drained away from her face, leaving it pale.

"Our only chance is the schooner," pursued Morgan. "She's due here from Tahiti in three days, Chang said. He may have been lying. But she calls once a month, I know."

"I'd like a bath," said Val suddenly. "Do the Chinese ever wash?"

Morgan smiled faintly.

"Sometimes. Now listen. We mustn't sleep at the same time. One of us must keep watch. I don't know what may happen, but something will. Whoever's awake must stand up, for fear of dropping off again. You sleep first, and I'll wake you."

"But—"

"Do what you're told and don't argue," said Morgan sharply. He made her lie down on the divan with a cushion under her head. He himself stood by the door, leaning against it so that he might detect the least movement. Everywhere a hot silence reigned, broken only by the faint splash of the fountain. Again and again he found his head nodding and jerked himself upright once more. Was it indeed to be their prison, this room with its bare walls and hard mud floor? The weary minutes passed and presently he awoke Val.

She took up her stand by the door without a word and stood there watching him as he fell asleep. His head lay on his arm and his utter abandonment touched her strangely. He seemed suddenly helpless, with the helplessness of a sleeping boy. Unconsciously she found herself comparing him with Stewart. With something like a start she realized that it was many hours since she had thought of Stewart. Now in the stillness of the afternoon she thought about him, deliberately, calmly, remembering his passionate look and his words when he told her what she was to him. She remembered how his voice and his caressing hands had thrilled her, how he had wakened in her strange desires and emotions hitherto unknown. Had she loved him? She considered the question dispassionately, a little dismayed at her own calmness. She had admired him. In the reaction that she felt after the sickly effeminate poets and the self-satisfied business men who made up her circle in New York, she had fallen a prey to Stewart's virility. He had conquered her, swept her away on the tide of his splendid, careless strength.

A question came into her mind. She shied away, but it persisted, and she had to answer. How would Stewart have acted towards her during the last few days. Given Morgan's opportunities, what would he have done?

She knew. At the memory of his sensual lips she put her hands to her hot face. Suppose she had been alone with him, as she had been alone with Morgan, what respect, what pity would he have shown her? For the first time she saw him as he was, her eyes cleared of the romantic haze that had obscured the vision of him. About her heart a little cold doubt began to grow. Was Morgan's story true? Had Stewart indeed robbed a dead man to get possession of the Taukura chart? If it were so, he had no right to the pearls. But this would implicate her brother. What had been his share in the matter? Memories came leaping to her mind of his uneasiness, his inexplicable anger at the mention of Donovan's name. Was that the attitude of an innocent man? Aghast at this disloyalty she thrust the question from her. Yet it persisted at the back of her mind, and she could not drive it away.

WHEN she judged that a full hour had gone, she shook Morgan into wakefulness. He sat up yawning and even as he did so, there came a sound at the door. Slowly it opened, and disclosed Chang.

"You are refreshed with sleep?" he said. "That is well."

He stepped aside and Ah Foo came in, bearing a great copper bowl of water, and an armful of new towels. These he put in the middle of the floor and departed.

"Rice is awaiting you," said Chang, and shut the door.

They made a hurried toilet and went into the next room, where the smell of food rose appetizingly. Chang was waiting for them, and behind him stood Ah Foo.

There was a great dish of curry, cunningly made and very hot. There were some curious little fish, spitted seven or eight at a time on thin sticks. These had been cooked in oil and were esteemed a delicacy. They required a very fine palate and Val did not appreciate them. There was a dish composed of goat's-milk curds, highly seasoned and baked in a shallow pan. It had the appearance of scrambled eggs. Preserved rose-leaves and candied petals of orange blossom, produce of some far-off orchard, were offered to Val.

Chang entertained them as they ate. In his throaty voice he told them of the things he had seen in various parts of the world. He slipped in little anecdotes to sharpen the talk, exquisite cameos of wit that never failed to make their delicate points. He ransacked a capacious memory in order to win a smile from Val. He told her of the jade-sellers of Rangoon; of the holy men of Benares with their withered limbs; of the tiger-men who live in Nepal. He sketched for her a day in the life of a priest in the great temple at Tientsin, where the wonderful singing bell is kept. He showed her the fishermen on the Hwang-ho, who teach their birds to catch fish for them. Breathlessly she listened to the tale of what happened to the thief who stole roses from the Emperor's garden. After that came the legend of the Dreaming God of Fu-chow. He had her entranced before the carved mysteries of Easter Island. He told her old stories of Tahiti as it was before the white men found it. The last story of all was of the great pearl that was found in the lagoon at Amanu.

As he told this, he watched her, and saw her troubled glance at Morgan. Morgan was frowning and his lips were pressed into a thin line. Chang had found out what he wanted to know.

With profuse apologies for his long conversation, he rose and struck the great brass gong that hung near the door. A Chinese slave padded in and slid aside the door of the sleeping-room.

"You are fatigued," Chang said graciously, "and I have talked over long. But with such an audience one could talk until the dawn."

He bowed to Valerie.

"May your sleep be refreshing," he said as they passed through the low door.

When it had closed after them, Morgan said, "We're done. He knows."

"How can he know?"

"Did you see him look at me when he told the story about the great pearl of Amanu? The sly yellow devil! How did he know? Is it possible that Stewart's been here?"

"Why should he?"

"Because his steering gear was damaged," said Morgan grimly, "and this is the nearest place for repairs. That's why."

A thought struck him.

"Stewart and Chang are friends. You're Stewart's friend. Why don't you go and tell Chang, eh? God, I hadn't looked at it that way. Here's a fine chance to get even with me."

She shook her head wearily.

"I don't know who's right and who's wrong," she said, "but I'm afraid of Chang. There's something evil about him. It terrifies me when I think about his fat yellow hands. Besides—"

She came close to him, looking up into his eyes in a passionate desire to know the truth.

"I've got to know, I've got to understand, even though it hurts. What happened to Donovan?"

"I found him dead, with his ship scuttled, and the chart—the only chart of Taukura—gone."

"God's truth?"

"God's truth," said Morgan solemnly.

Valerie turned white. She knew he was not lying.

"Then Stewart—and my brother—"

He interrupted her in a voice that quivered with fury.

"All right. We needn't talk about it. Stewart will answer to me one day. As for your brother—" He bit his lip, then went on quickly, "your brother is a weak fool. He does not matter. It is Stewart who matters. One day I shall kill him."

The passion had gone from his voice. But the deadly quietness of his last words made Valerie shudder. So it was true. She was convinced at last. She buried her face in her hands and broke into helpless sobs. Not until then did she realize how she had fought against her fears.

Morgan patted her shoulder awkwardly. She shrugged him away, and his heart tightened in a manner that filled him with vague alarm. What was it that made him want to take her in his arms and comfort her? Was it because she was such a lovely, frightened child? He persuaded himself that it was.

"Lie down," he said at length, "and get some sleep. I'll wake you presently."

She curled upon the divan. A lamp was placed in the middle of the room. It threw dim fantastic shadows over the floor. Now and then it flickered a little in the breeze that swept through the barred window. The night wind was fresh with a tang of the hidden sea. The rising moon silvered the swaying palms with its pale light. From the distance came the sounds of women's laughter. Leaning against the door, Morgan remembered how he and Pettigrew had listened to the same sound on the beach at Kikia, just before Pereira's knife had leapt out of the darkness. Bitterly he wondered how it would all end. For Pettigrew it was ended already. But for himself and Valerie? She looked very young and helpless as she lay on the divan. They had been through a lot together, he reflected.

AT THE end of two hours his drooping lids warned him that he could not keep awake much longer. He was worn out with fatigue and anxiety and badly in need of rest. Yet was it safe to snatch a couple of hours' much-needed rest? That Chang knew the secret of the pearls he was convinced. How or when mattered not at all. What would the Chinaman attempt? There was one thing that was certain. He would stop at nothing to gain what he wanted. Morgan pulled out his knife and felt the keen blade. His hands were trembling violently. He thought: "If I can't get a bit of sleep, I'll go to pieces."

He awoke Val, and made her stand up with her back against the door. She stood patiently, a dim figure in the shadow beyond the pool of light in the centre of the room. Morgan flung himself down and fell straightway into an abyss of sleep.

The night wore on.

At the end of half an hour he awoke suddenly, with a warning clanging in his brain. Val had slid into a crumpled heap by the door. At one bound he leapt from his couch a sick feeling at his heart. When he saw that she was not dead, but sleeping heavily, the reaction overwhelmed him. Roughly he jerked her to her feet. In the dim light her startled eyes sought his in terrified questioning.

"You've got to keep awake," he said hoarsely. "You must. You must."

He shook her fiercely, his great hands bruising her soft flesh till she moaned. At the sound a great pity rose through his anger.

"Go to sleep," he said, with a catch in his voice. "I'll watch now."

But he was too spent. As the night waned he sank into a heavy stupor of exhaustion. An hour before dawn the door slid open. A yellow hand appeared . . . .

When he awoke the sun was high and the room intolerably hot. His groping hand sought his waist. The pearls were gone.

CHAPTER XII

HE LOOKED up and met Valerie's eyes. They stared at each other in sick dismay. Then Morgan laughed mirthlessly, and rose to his feet. He began to pace up and down, reproaching himself bitterly, till Valerie stopped him.

"It's no use making a song about it. They're gone. Chang did know about it then. You were right, when you said he did. But it's no good blaming yourself. What are we going to do?"

"What can we do?" burst out Morgan. "There's only one thing to be done and I'll do it. If I can get my hands round Chang's greasy neck—"

Val covered her ears with her fingers.

"Don't talk like that. You can't do it. You can't do anything to him. He's got us right under his feet. He's only got to nod. We're done."

"We're not," said Morgan fiercely.

The belt lay on the ground. Whoever had stolen the pearls had removed it from his body, taken out the spoil, and laid the empty belt carefully beside the sleeping man. Morgan buckled it about his waist again. The knife had gone. His heart missed a beat at this discovery, and then leapt on again furiously. So it was war. Chang was making his preparations well in advance. It was a hint, a warning of what was to come. What was he likely to do next? At the sudden memory of traders' tales, Morgan repressed a shudder. There were so many things that Chang might do. A sense of his own impotence overwhelmed him. He walked to the barred window and looked out to sea. The harbor was empty. No sign of any ship met the eye. He turned to Valerie.

"It's a tight place," he told her, "but we'll worry through somehow. The great thing is not to show we're afraid."

His face hardened.

"There's one thing I'll have to say, because later on there mayn't be time. If something should happen to me, do anything—anything—rather than let Chang get you."

"I understand."

"You don't. You haven't any idea, you don't know. He's a fiend. Whatever he says, or whatever promises he makes, don't listen. Death's hard, but, believe me, it's preferable."

She nodded. Her face was drained of its color and her eyes had grown dark. Morgan was satisfied. Somehow she would find a way.

"Your knife's gone," she said at last, looking at him in startled dismay.

"I know. I've only my hands now."

He spread them out, regarding them with a speculative eye.

"They're pretty tough," he decided at last. "Maybe they're not handsome, but I reckon they'll come in useful for all that. Listen!"

Someone was moving in the outer room. Valerie came and stood beside him. He could hear her strained breathing. In her white face was no shadow of fear, and he felt a quick throb of admiration. Well, she'd need all the pluck she had, soon. The door slid open about two inches and closed abruptly. After a moment's pause it was opened again and this time it slid slowly to its full width. In the aperture stood Chang, smiling blandly.

"I hope you have slept well," he said. "I did not come sooner for fear of disturbing your honorable repose. Rice is prepared, if you will deign to eat."

In his hand he held the little ivory fan. Valerie found herself watching it with fascinated eyes. Somehow it seemed as if he were weaving a spell with it, a spell that would bind her hand and foot. She tried to turn away and could not. What mesmerism was there in the ceaseless movement of that sinister hand?

"Why do you hesitate?" he was saying to Morgan. "I assure you that the food is pure and free from poison."

HE STOOD aside and waited until they had entered the outer room where a meal was ready. The silken cushions were piled for them and Ah Foo waited obsequiously in the background. Morgan gave a swift glance round the room. Across his mind came a desperate impulse to snatch Valerie in his arms and make a bolt through the open door. But the uselessness of it rose before him. He must do nothing to precipitate matters. On the contrary, all his powers must be bent to the preservation of peace for as long as possible. Their only hope of salvation was in delay. If the schooner was due in a couple of days, as Chang had said, they would make a desperate bid for freedom. Until then, Morgan decided, he must hold himself back.

He had a sudden vision of Chang's yellow fingers greedily caressing the pearls, and his blood rose in spite of his endeavour to remain calm.

"Be seated," came the throaty voice. "This dish has been made for your especial delectation. It is composed of rice and the roes of very small fish which the Kanakas call 'Kavoe.' It is seasoned with a secret herb which I import, specially for this purpose, from China."

Morgan forced himself to eat, and to make monosyllabic replies when Chang addressed a remark to him. His brain was working feverishly, trying to determine where Chang would be most likely to conceal the pearls. He raked the walls with keen eyes, but there was no suggestion of a hiding place to be found. Perhaps they were hidden in some distant safe on the other side of the courtyard. More probably, Chang had them somewhere on his person, safely stowed among the voluminous folds of his silken wrappings.

The interminable meal dragged on. Chang's voice droned incessantly, monotonously, tearing at Morgan's nerves. He was oppressed by a curious sense that they were all waiting for something—he and Valerie and Chang, waiting for the encounter which all knew to be inevitable. Which of them would start it? What chance word would put the torch to the gunpowder? And that silent figure in the background—Ah Foo—for what was he waiting?

"YOU are not eating," said Chang to Valerie.

He passed her a bowl filled with fruit. As she reached out to take some, he drew his hand back. In passing, his fingers touched her wrist in a subtle caress.

Morgan saw it.

"Keep your yellow paws to yourself," he said.

Chang smiled at the fury in his voice.

"My honorable friend need have no fear," he murmured.

"Fear?" echoed Morgan contemptuously. "Fear of you, you thief?"

"Be seated," urged Chang. "Why should our pleasant repast be interrupted by unseemly brawls and dissensions?"

"I'm damned if I'll be ordered about by you," said Morgan, hotly, "I've had enough."

He stood up, towering above the imperturbable Chinaman.

"Where are the pearls?"

The question echoed in a room grown suddenly very still. In the tense silence that followed the four of them seemed carved out of stone. The only thing left alive was the little white fan that flapped to and fro in Chang's hand like the wing of an evil bird.

"Pearls?" said Chang at last.

"Yes. You stole them. Last night, while I was asleep."

"You are quite mad," said Chang blandly. "I know nothing of any pearls. If one of my servants has thus abused you, I will find him, and you shall watch him beaten to death."

"You liar," said Morgan. "What have you done with them? How did you know about them? Stewart—has Stewart been here?"

Chang smiled.

Morgan turned to Ah Foo.

"Here—you! You savee Stewart?"

But Ah Foo's impassive face did not change. He stood flat against the wall with folded arms. The carved Buddha was not more motionless.

"Then he has been here," said Morgan. "How else could you have known? When did he come?"

"It is useless to attempt to delude the omniscient Morgan," smirked Chang. "Yes, honorable Stewart has been here."

He paused, and glanced from Morgan to Valerie.

"We have so few visitors. Paviete is outside the trade route. Sometimes no one comes here for a year, except my good friend, the captain of the schooner. My very good friend, the captain of the schooner."

At last he allowed a hint of triumph to glitter in his little eyes.

"It is a lonely life," he went on. "Yes, very lonely. However, one can always find distraction."

He was looking now at Valerie. His eyes travelled greedily over her slim body. Morgan clenched his fists.

"Leave my wife alone," he said thickly.

"Your wife? You forget that the honorable Stewart has been here. He has told me many things. Madam, shall I repeat to your honorable—husband, the things that Stewart . . ."

His malicious voice died away.

AS THE full import of his words flashed on Valerie, she shrank back. Chang's eyebrows lifted in a movement so slight that none but Ah Foo saw it.

He knew what it meant, and his hand stole nearer the brazen gong by his side. He had seen that his master's aim was to make Morgan lose his temper. This done, he knew exactly what would happen. It all fell out as he and Chang had planned. As Morgan sprang, the deep note of the gong boomed once. At the sound, swift feet came hurrying to the open door. Morgan was vaguely aware of dark hands that tore at him as he struggled to reach Chang's throat. He beat them off, but they returned, bruising him, causing a dull ache, that turned presently to a splitting pain as his arm was twisted above his head. His left hand slipped, and clawed at the shining folds of Chang's gown. His lips were shut and his breath made a queer hissing noise as it whistled through his nostrils. No one spoke.

Morgan and Chang, Ah Foo and the three Kanakas—all of them seemed to Val like figures in some hideous silent dream. She wanted to scream, to cry out, but something stopped the words in her throat. Who was there to hear? She looked round wildly. Her eyes fell on the white Buddha, cold and aloof in his shrine. Save for the hard breathing of the antagonists, there was little sound. She could hear the wind sighing in the palm trees outside. Somewhere a child was crying lustily, and a woman's voice soothed it.

Morgan was weakening. His head was beginning to swim. He knew himself to be overpowered, but he fought on, vainly, desperately, obeying the fierce instinct that makes all living things choose death rather than capture. He was obsessed by the desire to smash his fist into that yellow face. Chang was smiling, a faint smile that drew his lips back from his teeth, which gleamed like the fangs of a wolf.

Back and back the sinewy arms dragged Morgan. He felt the bite of cords about his wrists and his legs. He lunged suddenly and felt a grim satisfaction as one of the Kanakas sprawled heavily on the mud floor. He saw Valerie huddled against the wall, and tried to tell her not to worry, that it would be all right. The futility of his words mocked at him. All right! It was about as wrong as it could be.

If Pettigrew had only been there, they might have put up a better show, a longer show, anyway. Yet would it have ended differently? He asked himself the question as he struggled with the rope that cut into his flesh. The Kanakas jerked him upright against the wall and went out, muttering to each other and rubbing themselves. One of them limped and Morgan felt a savage joy at the sight.

He shook the blood out of his eyes. Things were coming into focus again. He could see Valerie plainly, crouched in a corner with one hand pressed against her lips. Beside her stood Ah Foo, his arms folded, his face inscrutable. In the middle of the room stood Chang, regarding his prisoner with an air of triumph. In his hand the ivory fan still fluttered.

"You are impetuous, my friend," he observed in the mildest of accents. "It grieves me inexpressibly to see you in this condition. But what does Confucius tell us? 'The violent man is his own enemy.' "

"Cut it out," said Morgan, painfully. "What are you going to do?"

"How exquisite are the tortures of uncertainty!" mused Chang. "There are many things that might happen. Who shall presume to foretell the future? But rest assured. No harm shall come to your—wife. May one advise you to keep still?" as Morgan made a sudden movement. "Those cords which have the honor to bind you are very strong. You cannot escape. But they are of a peculiar fineness which lacerates the flesh more quickly than ordinary thongs. Therefore it is unwise to struggle."

"You swine," said the other. "You yellow swine! Chang, listen. You're top dog for the minute, but it's not going to last. If you hurt the girl—"

"Have I not assured you all will be well?" the smooth tones interrupted him. "It is my intention to give you an opportunity for meditation. During that time you may ponder with pleasure on the diversions that I shall discover for the honorable lady during your lengthy absence."

He clapped his hands sharply, and the Kanakas came running. Morgan squared his shoulders to meet them. Ah Foo crept up behind him and, at Chang's signal, slipped a bandage over his eyes.

Something struck him on the temple and they dragged him away like a felled ox.

LAMOTTE sat idly on deck and gazed across the sea. He had the heavy look of a man who is not sleeping well. His restless hands plucked continually at a piece of rope that lay across his knees. The *Swallow* was dragging under a sluggish breeze which had not freshened since they lost sight of Paviete. Lamotte wished they had never gone near the accursed place. Since he had seen Chang, Stewart had been morose and sullen, prone to quarrel on the slightest pretext. Was it because he had lost hope of regaining the pearls? Lamotte shrugged at the thought. Stewart's tenacity of purpose was a byword. What was it, then? Possibly his pride was wounded by Chang's open doubt as to whether he were stronger than Morgan. That might be the cause of his unusual taciturnity.

Lamotte rolled himself a fresh cigarette. Presently he went and leaned against the deckhouse. Somehow he liked to feel the hardwood at his back. Nothing, no one, could come up behind him unawares. Once or twice lately he had had the sensation of a hand just between his shoulder blades.

Stewart found him with a dead cigarette between his lips. In his eyes was the strained expectant look of one who thinks he can hear something.

"What's up?" curiously inquired Stewart.

"Listen," said Lamotte.

"I don't hear anything."

Lamotte drew a long breath, and pitched away the cigarette. Stewart regarded him with curiosity.

"What is it?" he asked again.

But Lamotte refused to answer. He began pacing up and down the deck with long nervous strides. Useless to tell Stewart that the voice of a dead man rang in his ears. Yet would it not be a relief to tell someone? Perhaps if he spoke of it, the thing would cease. Since Donovan's death he had known no peace. If he dragged his terror into the open, laid it naked before the jeering unbelief of Stewart, he might kill it.

He halted abruptly.

"What happens when a man dies?" he said at length.

"I'm not a parson," protested the other.

"What do you think happens?"

Stewart snapped his fingers.

"I think we go out—like that. Why? Are you thinking of suicide?"

"You do not believe that a man's soul continues to live?"

"What are you getting at?" demanded Stewart. "Joining the Wesleyans, eh?"

"Tell me," persisted Lamotte.

"I've told you. I guess we've got just one life. That's why I'm making the most of mine. By the church people's reckoning, about nine-tenths of humanity is going to end down below. If that's so, guess I'll follow the crowd. But they're wrong. Nothing happens."

"It does," said Lamotte, with burning eyes, "it does. The soul lives on. And—and the body. I tell you, I know. Donovan—"

"Donovan!" interrupted Stewart's contemptuous voice.

"I have seen him. I have seen him three times. Twice in the night, in the darkness. And yesterday—in the daylight. He looks at me. And his eyes—not angry, not pleading. Threatening—do you hear me? Threatening! And exultant . . . yes, he knows of something evil that is going to happen. He is glad, glad because in some way he will be avenged. I tell you, he knows. He has the secrets of the future. He can see something that is coming. *Sapristi!* What can the dead see, that he should look at me like that?"

He was shivering as if with ague.

"If I live, I shall see him always. If I die, I shall meet him. He is there, waiting, waiting. I am afraid to die, because of him. You say there's no hell. I tell you, I'm there now. Do you know what makes hell? Not pain, not anguish, not torture of the body. It's fear."

His voice sank to a whisper. Stewart glanced uneasily at the blanched face and quivering lips.

"Well, you needn't inflict your horrors on me," he said. "I always thought there was a yellow streak in you somewhere. Afraid of a dead man! Pah!"

He turned on his heel and walked away, nosing the breeze anxiously. Assuming that the *Anna* was making for Kikia, there was no time to be lost. Of course Morgan would join the Tahiti boat there and make for New York. "To whom would he take the pearls?" wondered Stewart.

And Valerie . . .

At the thought of Valerie he bit his lips. His passion for her had grown with frustration. The memory of her pale piquant face came sweeping over him, bringing a longing that tortured him with its intensity. Desire for her remembered beauty surged up within him, and with it came furious jealousy. That fellow Morgan, Pettigrew didn't count, of course. Who would look at an old brute like Pettigrew? But that other—Morgan—what of him?

He ran his fingers through his hair and felt the moisture on his brow. He smiled at himself, a wry twisted smile that had in it a grim determination. His hands itched to reach his enemy. He smarted under the consciousness that he had been outwitted on that night when Valerie had been stolen. He could envisage it all so clearly. He remembered how he had dashed up the companion at Lamotte's shout, and plunged into a confusion of fighting men. And what had Valerie done, left alone? What had happened down there while he and Lamotte were struggling on deck?

"Tuarti!"

He glanced up sharply. Kaoha, on the look-out, was pointing south.

"Look, Tuarti!"

Stewart shaded his eyes with his hand, and swung himself higher to get a better view. At first he could see nothing. Then, straining his eyes, he caught broken glimpses of a black object that rose and fell among the tumbling waves like a cork.

"Catamaran, Tuarti," called Kaoha. "Suppose he come this way, suppose Kanaka boy want find Tuarti."

Presently he spoke again, more excitedly.

"Him catamaran belong Pelaya in Paviete."

"Paviete? What the devil—all right."

Stewart found Lamotte, still smoking moodily, his shoulders jammed tightly against the deckhouse.

"There's a catamaran chasing us. Kaoha says it's from Paviete. I'm going to put her about and wait for 'em."

THEY put the *Swallow* about, and waited. Nearer and nearer crept the long black craft with its weary rowers. Pelaya stood in the stern, one hand upraised in sign of a peaceful errand. The others were exhausted, they lifted the powerful oars in mechanical fashion, worn out with rowing. It was many hours since they left Paviete. But for the sluggish breeze, they would not have overtaken the schooner so soon. Indeed, Ah Foo had considered that they would not meet him before they reached Onoru, the first port of call, where Stewart had planned a brief landing to take on stores. In silence the catamaran crawled up to the *Swallow*. As the boat drew alongside, the Kanakas buckled over their oars and lay like dead men until Stewart's boys hauled them on board. Pelaya himself came and stood before the two white men.

"What is it?" demanded Lamotte.

"Me come Paviete," said Pelaya. "Ah Foo say 'Come back. Moriani in Paviete.' "

"Moriani?" echoed Stewart incredulously.

Pelaya nodded.

"Kaoha," shouted Stewart, "you take Pelaya below, you give Pelaya bullamacow. Pelaya good boy."

He turned to Lamotte.

"How can Morgan have got to Paviete?"

"It's a trick," burst out Lamotte, as Kaoha led Pelaya away, "it's a trick to get us back. How can Morgan be there? Chang's got some cursed spite against us, and he's tricking us to go back."

Stewart frowned.

"I don't think so. He hasn't sent the message. It's Ah Foo."

He stopped, as if making up his mind about something. Then he said, "You know Ah Foo hates Chang."

"Why?"

"Something about a woman."

"You think that this is genuine, then?"

"Yes."

"You want to put back to Paviete?"

"Yes."

"It's a trap," said Lamotte again. "Morgan can't be there. It's a trick of Chang's to trap us back there. What does he want? I tell you it's dangerous."

"I'm going back."

"And I say no."

Stewart laughed.

"I say we're going back, and that goes as it lies. If Morgan's there, it's the chance of a lifetime."

His eyes were gleaming oddly.

"No," Lamotte was shouting, "no, no. We will not go back. Do you hear me? I say we will not."

His face was livid. In his own mind he was firmly convinced that Chang had some evil plan in his mind. It was impossible that Morgan should be in Paviete.

"You fool," said Stewart, "I tell you Ah Foo's straight. If he says that Morgan's there, you can bet your shirt it's true. Do you think he'd dare to double-cross me? What's the good of saying Morgan can't be there? Anyway, we're going back."

For answer Lamotte drew back to spring. Stewart's hand slipped to his belt.

"You move," he said in a frozen voice, "and you'll get it. Ever seen a man shot in the stomach? It takes three days to die."

His eyes held Lamotte's, scorching them, beating into the other's brain.

"Take your cat's eyes off me," stormed Lamotte. "Take them off, I say. *Dieu!* what a beast you are! And I could crush you—I could crush you."

The smoldering hatred between them, born of fear on one side and contempt on the other, blazed out at last. They faced each other, Lamotte white with sudden passion that wavered under Stewart's cold fury. Presently his eyes fell and he turned away awkwardly, cowed by the force of the other's hostile personality.

"We'll put back," came the level voice. "I say so, and what I say goes. And if you want to try your hand at crushing, you can damn well get on with it. I'm not worrying."

"You wait! You wait!" muttered Lamotte, savagely.

He strode away, and Stewart allowed himself to smile. He had dealt with men of Lamotte's stamp before. He watched the tall figure disappear round the deck-house. At that moment Kaoha came running.

"Oh, Tuarti, Pelaya he say Moriani in Paviete in hut belong Tiang (Chang). Pelaya he say him girl 'long Moriani, white girl all same white like Missee Val. Tuarti, maybe white girl—"

"Send him here," broke in Stewart, "you go tell Pelaya come quick."

He waited impatiently until the grinning Kanaka stood before him.

"You tell about white girl."

"Tuarti, white girl—"

He listened to the rambling sentences until Pelaya had talked himself out. Then he sought Lamotte in the cabin.

"Valerie's in Paviete."

Lamotte leapt to his feet.

"What?"

"Yes. Pelaya's been coughing up a bit more than Ah Foo meant him to, I think. From what I can make out there must have been a wreck. He didn't say anything about Pettigrew. I guess he's down with Davy Jones. Now what about putting back, eh?"

But Lamotte's mind was working queerly.

"You want her. Yes, you want her. When we find her again, you will take her. I would sooner see her dead."

"Or, with Morgan?"

Lamotte flung back his head.

"Yes, rather than you."

"You're mad," said the other, staring. "What's got you anyway? And let me tell you this; if we don't hurry it'll be neither Morgan nor I. It'll be—Chang."

"Chang?"

"Yes. You know him. You know what he'll do. The devil! If Ah Foo hadn't sent after us, we'd never have known."

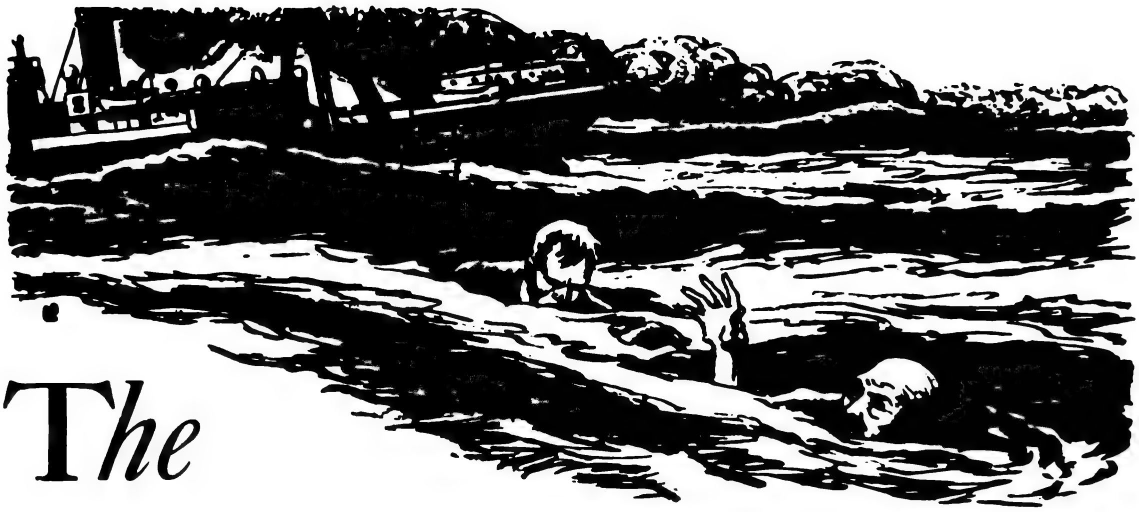
"But he's friendly with us," urged Lamotte stupidly.

Stewart made a gesture of impatience.

"Does anything count when a man wants a woman?"

He was gone again, and to Lamotte's ears came the sound of scurrying feet and shouting voices. Presently he felt the sway of the ship as the *Swallow* swung slowly southward.

In the following chapters Stewart and Chang stage a battle royal for the pearls.



The Biggest Man on Board

A Story of the Sea's Incessant Danger

By FRANK H. SHAW

THE moment John Baxter set foot aboard the *Colleen Bawn* Captain Collins hated him, and for the life of him couldn't tell why. He also hated himself for the suggestion of inferiority that troubled him.

"Watch yourself or this man will get your job," an inward voice seemed to din into his brain. That was a ridiculous feeling. Wasn't he Elijah Collins, of the *Colleen Bawn*—the man who'd made himself famous by a hundred reckless deeds? And wasn't the *Colleen Bawn* engaged on the savagest run along the whole bitter coastline, winter and summer alike? There wasn't another man who could take any ship along that route, year in, year out, keeping to timing like an express train, fine or foul weather, but Captain Collins. The big dailies had published epic stories of his prowess, called him a worthy successor of the old adventurers who had made the wildest seas their chariots, they'd published his portrait and that of his ship. He'd grown grizzled on the Bank Tail run; and what he didn't know about currents, tide-races and whirlpools wasn't worth knowing. When fog obscured the land and the sun, he could smell his way into port: had done it scores of times, without so much as scraping his paint.

"Who do you reckon you might be?" he demanded ungraciously, still smarting under that sense of inferiority.

"John Baxter, sir," said the new arrival cordially. He was a big fair young man with a pleasant smile. His one big desire appeared to be on good terms with this superior. Not that there was anything sycophantic in his manner: he stood fearlessly in the cabin, head slightly back-tilted, gray eyes meeting Collins's searching scrutiny.

"The new mate, eh? H'm!" There was almost the hint of a latent snarl in the question. Collins couldn't remember ever to have felt that way before. "Think you know all about the Bank Tail run, do you?"

"Why, no, sir—not yet; but I'm anxious to learn."

"I've been learning twenty-five years man and boy; and I don't know all there is to know yet, not by a long chalk. What service have you?"

Baxter took out his discharges and laid them before the frowning autocrat. "Served your time in the Waddiloe boats, then?"

"Yes, sir."

"H'm. That's yachting. Not proper seafaring, like this run. How old might you be?"

"Twenty-seven, sir." In his own heart Collins knew that the Waddiloe boats had at least as difficult a run as the *Colleen Bawn*. Any man trained in them was a pukka seaman; because the Waddiloe boats either made men or broke them. With the Snorter Race running at eleven knots in the springs you had to keep all your wits about you if you didn't want to pile your ship on the Skeleton Reef, or, winning clear of that, come to grief on Hunter's Spur.

"What's come over old Michael to send me a boy, I'd like to know? What've you left the Waddiloes for—sacked?"

"No, sir." Somehow he didn't look the sort of man to be sacked. "Didn't see any prospects there, promotion being as slow as it is."

"H'm. There's no coffins going overside in this packet that I'm aware of. After my job?"

"There didn't seem a chance of going first mate in the Waddiloes till God knows when, sir. When I heard Mr. Thomas had got broken up I sent in my application, being newly passed master—"

"Thomas was something like a mate. He set a mighty high standard to live up to. I could trust him."

"I hope you'll be able to trust me, sir," smiled Baxter. "Here's my reference from Captain Marks, *Clumber Head*." Even Captain Collins could not fail to respect an opinion of Simon Marks, who'd been in command when Collins was apprentice aboard a collier brig and learning his trade in the hardest seafaring school in the northern hemisphere, perhaps. And Simon Marks spoke well of John Baxter: bestowing the reluctant praise of the sea. "Found him qualified and competent in the performance of his duties under all circumstances," wasn't bad.

"Might be worth the paper it's written on," grunted Collins, throwing the testimonial aside. "Mightn't. I've given good references to dud men myself before now—to get rid of 'em."

That smoldering resentment persisted. He knew an unreasonable inclination to throw something at John Baxter and hurt him; mar his face for him; humiliate him, as he stood there, erect and capable-seeming. And he understood why that resentment was there. Old Michael disliked Captain Collins, because of his rugged independence. You didn't catch Elijah Collins soft-soaping any man alive, no matter who he might be. But old Michael knew that in Collins he had the one man for the job, tried and tested through the stormy years. Obviously old Michael wanted John Baxter, suave, polite and enthusiastic as well as civil—to get himself ready to step into Elijah Collins's shoes and that meant the sack for Collins. There were wheels within wheels.

"You'll get one hell of a try-out here, I warn you," he snorted. "We don't encourage owner's pets aboard the *Colleen Bawn*."

"I'm willing to be tried, sir."

"Bah! When can you take on duty?"

"At once, sir." Captain Collins banged his fist on the cabin table.

"We stand for no dandy-fine Navy-Navy palaver aboard this ship. The mate works—see? He *works*. They run us short-handed; and there's only one man allowed to wear a collar and tie, that's me, the captain. Get that? You don't look as if you understood the first letter of work."

"We didn't exactly loaf around in the Waddiloes, sir," smiled Baxter. He was willing to be patient, because a good deal depended on his securing this job and making good at it. There was a girl, of course.

"Well, come out on deck and I'll show you what's wanted." Ungraciously Collins arose and roughly-shouldered past the applicant. He knew he was showing himself at his worst, but he justified himself to himself. Here was a man expecting to do him dirt, step into his shoes, oust him from the position he'd held for longer than he could remember almost: it was up to any man to fight tooth and nail for what was rightly his. He didn't improve in his liking for Baxter when a shore-fellow, obviously strange about the docks, accosted the new mate and asked:

"You Captain Collins, sir?" The mate had his shoregoing clothes on, of course, and Collins was dressed anyhow; but that covert insult rankled diabolically. It showed—oh, yes, it showed.

"I'm Captain Collins, of course!" he snarled. The shore-fellow looked astonished. "What d'you want?"

"I've been sent down with a parcel of stuff—"

Collins wished something would drop from aloft and hit Baxter. But it didn't.

"I'll see to it, sir, shall I?" asked the new mate. He showed willing.

"Go on, then." The shore-fellow led the way across the gangway, Baxter following him. On the quayside: "Last man I'd have taken to be the skipper," he ventured. "Always thought the captain of a ship was the biggest man aboard."

"Things don't go by size at sea," laughed Baxter. "Captain Collins is the finest sailorman along this coast."

"Well, he doesn't look it. Looks more like a Methodist parson, if you ask me anything."

Baxter attended to the delivery of the parcel and wasted no time; asking no questions concerning its disposal, carrying on like a man who knew his job. His evil genius actuating him, Captain Collins hitched the inboard gangway ladder a trifle, so that when the mate returned, the contrivance slid away. Most men must have come an awkward cropper, some might have been seriously injured; but as he felt the ladder slip away Baxter threw himself neatly backwards and landed on his feet. Then he replaced the steps and cleverly lashed them so that they could not cause further trouble.

Collins piloted him around the decks, disheveled and draggled. He took an impish delight in pointing out the evidences of the *Colleen Bawn's* everlasting sea-struggles. He wanted to impress on John Baxter the fact that he, Elijah Collins, was the man who took the ship through or over the worst weather the hemisphere could show; he wanted to prove to this tawny giant what sort of man he was offering to serve under.

"THAT happened when we shipped big water off Cape Huntley," he said, pointing to obvious repairs in the bulwarks. "Clean-swept, she was and the mate we had then wouldn't go for'ard to help. He was scared—though he'd crowed about the weather he'd seen. A paper-backed no-good—like you in appearance. I fired him, of course." A heavy spar lay across the deck, part of the cargo-gear. Captain Collins stepped over it awkwardly; Baxter grasped one end and lifted it clear, doing the thing casually, as if the derrick were a handspike.

"Showing off!" thought Collins. "I'll teach him!" He felt he hated Baxter even a little more after this casual display of physical strength. The fellow was young, Collins was middle-aged, past his best. And it was drummed into the captain's mind that this giant would get his job—would get his job.

"Not while I've my wits about me," ran his thought. He rasped out exaggerated stories of the hardships to be encountered, hoping the new fellow would weaken. But Baxter laughed lightly, he wasn't one of the scaring sort.

"She's a fine ship," he said ungrudgingly.

"Properly handled, yes, there's nothing wrong with her. But she takes a man to run her, a *man!* Now, then, get busy—if you're still inclined to take on."

"I like the ship, sir. I'm anxious to get started."

"What've you done with your dunnage—taking a day off to fetch it down aboard?"

"I brought it along, sir, it's in my cabin now." Cheek! Taking it for granted he'd get and keep the billet!

"For two pins I'd order it ashore, my cocky boy!" Collins thought; but said aloud:

"Then get changed into working-gear unless you want to muck-up that fancy suit of yours. And then get down into the tanks and see what those scalers are after!"

"Ay, ay, sir." Baxter went to his cabin and wasting no time in elaborate unpacking, changed into a boiler suit. It betrayed evidences of hard wear; and but for that niggling fear, Captain Collins must have admitted to himself that the new mate didn't seem a loafer. He walked briskly along the deck to the trunkway leading down to the tanks; and a minute or so later the rattle of the chipping-hammers from below increased fivefold.

Captain Collins went ashore, without much sprucing-up. He was a conservative man, and had never been one to sacrifice to the conventions. He liked to be pointed out as Collins of the *Colleen Bawn*, hard-case skipper of a hard-case ship. He liked to dress the part, a man with no frills and nonsense about him. He affected a lordly roll in his gait, and even when ashore he chewed tobacco. He proceeded to old Michael's office.

"What's this new-fangled Nancy-boy

you've sent me as mate?" he demanded.

"Best man we could find for you, Elijah," chirruped the owner. "Good boy—oh, a good boy! The Waddiloe folks haven't a word to say against him; sorry to lose him they tell me. You'll find him useful." The sting rankled again in Collins's soul. That was it—you could see the thing sticking out a mile. An owner's pet, sent aboard to spy and report and—

"Well, you might like him, but I don't," he said gruffly. "Too much of the lardidardi fine gentleman about him, if you ask me anything."

"They change, they change a lot. Now I reckon a youngster who takes a pride in himself ashore will take a pride in his ship." It might have been accident that caused the owner's eyes, exaggerated behind their horn-rimmed spectacles, to rest for several moments on Captain Collins's shabbiness. But Collins thought it wasn't accident—it was definite proof of his fears. That was a hint to him.

"I don't reckon a man by his togs," he grumbled; "but by his work, when we get into a tight place."

"Well, well: report on Baxter—isn't that his name?—as you find him, Elijah."

That wasn't very satisfactory; but Collins saw possibilities. He'd put this interloper through the mill so bitterly, he assured himself, that he simply couldn't help but make a mess of things; then he could honestly report that he wasn't at all the right stamp of man for the job.

"I own to it that I like him," said old Michael. "He—he—he reminds me of what I was myself at his age."

Collins sought counsel of Drebbutt, the managing clerk; inviting him out for liquid refreshments in order to get into his confidence.

"What's the idea of putting a Waddiloe man into the *Colleen?*" he asked over the first brew.

"Search me! There's nothing against Baxter; 'smatter of fact, he did something rather big a while since, when the French schooner ran ashore on the Flotsam Ridge—remember? Swam with a rope and saved the crew."

"He's that chap, is he? He said nothing about it to me." Collins had never swum with a rope, he couldn't swim, if it came to that. Once again the feeling of inferiority troubled him.

"Have another go, won't you, Drebbutt?" And when it arrived, he leaned over the table. "What's at the bottom of it all? That's what I want to know. Is he earmarked for my job?"

Drebbutt laughed. "Is that what's biting you? Why should he be? There's nothing against you—you're there for life, so far as I know."

But Captain Collins didn't believe him. He saw a sinister plot laid against his own prosperity and repute. Everything pointed to it. But he wasn't the man to throw up his hands without a fight. And, anyhow, the work the *Colleen Bawn* had to do would probably find out the weak spot in Baxter, soften his backbone and try him out fatally. It wouldn't be Elijah Collins' fault if it didn't.

"Such as live longest will see most," he said darkly.

He went back aboard the *Colleen* with something of stealth, hoping to pounce on the new mate in the act of loafing. He walked straight and softly to Baxter's cabin; but he wasn't there. To all appearance the room hadn't been entered since he went ashore. He saw the scaling gang appear on deck and yelled for the foreman; who came, dripping with rust and grime, his face blackened with the smoke from the slush-lamps.

"What're you knocking-off for this time o' day?" the captain wanted to know.

"Finished the tank; sir, going to start on Number Two."

"You told me this morning you wouldn't be finished till late to-night," accused Collins.

"Ah, but that new mate of yours came down and bustled things about a bit, sir. He's a driver, that man—knows how to get the best out of the gang—does twice as much as the best, himself." There you were, even a dashed dockie was at it! There wasn't room for both Collins and Baxter aboard the *Colleen Bawn!*

But they were both there when the ship left dock and proceeded out to open water.

SHE was shipping it green over the forecastle when Baxter was stowing the old-fashioned anchors; but the work was done smartly and competently. If it hadn't been for the dislike he felt for the mate, Collins would have slowed his ship down a bit or run off before the sea to give those working for'ard a better chance; as it was he drove full speed into the tearing run of white water. He actually used the *Colleen* as a weapon. When a big greyback towered, instead of swinging her away from the menace, he lifted her more squarely into it, juggling with the helm, hoping that something might fetch away and hurt the mate, as mates had been hurt before on that treacherous forecastle. But Baxter wasn't hurt and he found time to drag a deckhand clear of trouble, too, just as it seemed the man would suffer a broken leg at least.

"Playing to the gallery!" growled Collins, witnessing this. "Trying to get fo'c'sle favor! I know that breed." But even so he was grudgingly compelled to admit that Baxter knew his job and went about it methodically. He had a trick of getting the best out of the crew: leading them instead of driving them. When the anchors were safe, he set his men to work clearing up; and the *Colleen* was soon almost unbelievably spick and span. Usually there were heavy deck-packages to be lashed and stowed, but everything had been seen to before the ship left smooth water and there wasn't really any fault to find. But Elijah Collins found fault, nevertheless. There was always that smarting uneasiness inside him: that smoldering hint of inferiority.

"Shall I take hold now, sir?" he asked, smiling, as he came to the chattering bridge.

"You? Here? What're you thinking about? Fancy I'd risk my ship in the Gut?"

"I know it pretty well, sir; I thought you might want a rest and smoke."

"Well, *I* don't know all its tricks, yet. Starting in by teaching me my job, are you? Me, that's been on this run as long as I have! Get you down on deck, mister; and bustle those gutter-scrapings about and sweat the liquor out of them." Actually nothing would have pleased Collins more than to get under cover, away from the merciless drive of wind and sea. Weather never stopped the *Colleen*, was her owner's boast along the water-fronts, but to seek cover meant an admission that his job wasn't the heroic thing he'd always cracked it up to be. Admit that this self-opinionated young springald knew as much as many years had taught Elijah Collins! Not likely.

Baxter went willingly enough to the deck and found enough to keep the crew employed. He didn't make work; but he saw that what was necessary was done. On the bridge Captain Collins shivered and cursed the level drive of the hurled spindrift against his face. The force of the wind drove it with the velocity of machine gun bullets. It soured his temper still more, it set him brooding over this incursion of a possible usurper. Then he saw the Potter's Light whirl up through the scud, two reds and a white. He discovered that he'd forgotten to make the usual allowance for the set of a weatherly tide, and the *Colleen* was perilously near the rock-fangs that stabbed eerily through the curdled foam. He blamed the helmsman for a carelessness he knew was his own, and howked the ship clear, heading her north-east full; and the engine-room telephone rang to inform him that the chief below found it necessary to reduce speed by reason of a heated bearing.

"You can't—you've got to keep her going hell-bent for the election!" he roared back.

"There's a smooth-water channel south of the Potter's when the tide's setting as it is now," said Baxter at his shoulder. "There's more than enough depth of water, sir—"

Collins flung round on him, snarling. "Think I don't know it?" he demanded. "Who in blazes do you think you are?"

"I've taken the *Clumber Head* through a few times, sir—when Captain Marks was sick, that's all. I didn't know whether you knew it was practicable."

Actually Captain Collins was scared of that channel; he'd never dared it, although he knew of its existence. But if the *Colleen's* speed were slowed now, with the rock-fangs showing uglily through the smother of spume, there was a chance that she might be swung down and one of the spikes might rip open her bottom plating like wet brown paper, a touch would do it.

"If we don't ease her she'll bust herself," shouted the chief. Collins swallowed hard.

"Port your hellum!" he ordered; that meant he was about to try the channel. John Baxter stepped into the wheelhouse and behind the man at the spokes. "Give her to me," he said quietly. The man obeyed without question, and stood handy. Collins waited until the Potter's was broad to starboard, then—"Steady!" he ripped.

"Steady, sir!" chanted Baxter, who had steadied two minutes before. There was no time now to trouble about the mate, the ship's careful conning demanded the exertion of the captain's every faculty. His heart was in his mouth as the slowed *Colleen* made for the single smooth patch between two thunderous walls of rock-pierced whiteness. White water creamed over both bulwarks; and the wind drove pitilessly.

"Watch her! Stabbud a bit!" But Baxter had already starboarded, and the melancholy bell-buoy drifted safely by. Collins was committed to the channel now; there wasn't room to turn; there wasn't steam enough to reverse. The moisture on his face wasn't all spray after another feverish five minutes. He noticed the *Colleen* was steered as steadily as a rock, once her course was altered to allow for the devious windings of the channel, she held to that course with arrow-like straightness. The ship appeared to forestall his intentions, she seemed almost human. He mentally patted himself on the back—he'd show this new-fangled mate the sort of man he was—and he'd brag along the quaysides that he'd brought the *Colleen* out through the channel in the height of a nor'east snifter.

The ship rioted, wallowing to the hurl of water; but each time she took the bit in her teeth and seemed likely to swing wide, she was bridled with iron hands and thrown into the straight. The telephone rang again from the engine-room; the chief reported the trouble set to rights, full speed was available. Through the wheelhouse window Collins saw the binnacle-lit face of the mate through the wheel spokes.

"What in heck are you doin' there, eh?" he volleyed. "Come out on deck here!"

"I thought, sir, as I knew the channel—" Baxter surrendered the spokes as Collins rang to full speed.

"I'm the man to do the thinking aboard this ship! The mate's job isn't at the wheel." The Potter's Light was swinging abeam, showing that all was well; and the *Colleen* again thrust into the teeth of wind and sea. Realising what he had done Captain Collins felt suddenly weak at the knees and covered his weakness with bluster.

"I don't hold with such as funk the outside route," he bellowed. "Do they learn you to funk weather in the Waddiloes?" In his own heart he knew what he knew, that every fathom of the passage had been a purgatory. He felt he hated Baxter more than ever. "There's a wash-port loose down there for'ard," he roared; "go down and see what's wrong." And as Baxter went down into the for'ard well he ordered the helmsman to starboard a point, thus bringing the run of the sea well on the bow, where it would crash aboard with added violence.

"Anyway, it's the mate's job to see everything right down there," he excused himself, as the whole water cascaded inboard. But he hoped something might happen to humble this cocksure youngster's pride. That fellow at the wheel would tell the fo'c'sle rats that it had required the mate at the wheel to negotiate the channel, and the mate would get the credit, not Collins. Oh, yes, it was easy to see what was in the wind—Baxter meant to get the command. But he'd show him!

"Everything all Sir Garnet down there, sir," reported the mate presently. He was saturated, despite his oilskins; and he was bruised from head to foot; he had lost square inches of skin; but his voice sounded unperturbed. Collins hated him a little more.

"Now that she's clear you can take her; I'm going down to supper," he grunted.

"Ay, ay, sir."

"And if anything goes wrong—look out! Not that anything could—"

BAXTER bared his head to the whirling sprays and inhaled pleasurably. This, he thought, was something like life—mate of the *Colleen*, and a proper gale blowing. He was always at his best when the weather was worst; and the *Colleen* was the best ship he'd known so far. If he went carefully, what with the decent pay, marriage with the chosen girl, wasn't so remote an affair as it had seemed a while back. He had no aspiration to the command as yet—he knew his youth; he knew, too, that in old Michael's employ were men better worthy the honor than himself. He was proud to have been appointed mate, content to wait for donkey's years if necessary before he shipped his dunnage in a captain's cabin. He wished the captain wasn't so bitter; but that was nothing unusual. All said and done, the weight of the responsibility was on the captain's shoulders, on this Bank Tail run more than on any other known in all the seven seas. You could make allowances for a bit of shirtiness. He shredded a pipeful of tobacco and filled a pipe, went to leeward of the wheelhouse to light it.

"Call that the way to keep a watch?" rasped Collins. "What sort of a mate do you pretend to be, eh?" This was right in the helmsman's ear, in a manner of speaking and skippers don't usually choke-off their mates in presence of the crew. It lessens authority when the deckhands know the old man's got his knife into the first officer.

"Sorry, sir—didn't know any objection'd be taken. In the Waddiloes—"

"You're not in those dashed ash-boats now; you're in a ship. Don't let me have to find fault again—"

When Baxter went below to his supper he found a spare table. The delicacies had been removed, by the captain's orders, said the steward with a covert grin. Collins had vented some of his spleen in a grumbled criticism of John Baxter over his own meal.

"Very well," said Baxter. He ate heartily of what was left; satisfying his hunger, which was what food was for, in his esteem. He recognised the stab, however; sensed its meaning. Things weren't going to be altogether rosy aboard the *Colleen* during this initial trip. But having got a decent job he was prepared to put up with a lot in order to keep it. And the most savage of skippers couldn't continue to rub it into a man who tried his damnedest.

But Collins did continue to rub it in. "I'll break that beggar's heart before I've done with him," he told himself, as the *Colleen* fought her dogged way along the bitter coast. He found fault incessantly, where fault was uncalled for. He relieved Baxter late when the weather was worst, and raised Cain if the mate were a minute late in giving his relief—not that Baxter ever was, but Collins flogged the clock during his deck-watch, shoved it on an odd five minutes here and odd five minutes there; making all things right when he went below by putting the hands back to the right time, thus saddling Baxter with a four and a half-hour watch. Recognising that the ship was meticulously kept, he yet growled. If old Michael came down aboard when they returned and saw the *Colleen* shining like a new pin, he'd sing the mate's praises for all he was worth; give him all the credit and forget to praise Elijah Collins.

"Well, we'll see!" said Collins. Even when toiling like a deckhand, Baxter contrived to keep himself neat and clean; and the men paid him more respect than they did the captain. That galled, too. Oh, assuredly, there wasn't room in the ship for both the men; one or other would have to go, and it wouldn't be Collins! But you never knew where you were with old Michael, who seemed to look on Baxter as some sort of a white-haired boy. The old chap might forget the years of Elijah Collins's faithful service and retain the mate instead of the captain.

Collins began to wish that something might happen that would prevent Baxter ever returning. Things did happen, even in well regulated ships. Cargo-guns occasionally crashed down from aloft and spattered men's brains about the deck; or ropes parted when a man's life depended on their soundness. If an untoward accident should happen, well, that would ease the situation certainly. Elijah Collins began to look his ship over with an eye to the possibility of accidents. Since all his hectoring and fault-finding and hazing didn't seem likely to effect their purpose of driving Baxter from the ship, it was just as well to consider other possibilities.

On a black night—black as hell's hobs, no less—when Baxter relieved him on the bridge, Captain Collins rasped:

"I've just been along for'ard there—after the lubberly way you stowed those anchors no wonder they're loose. Go and see to it; I'll hang on here a bit." The gale that had accompanied the *Colleen* clear through the Bank Tail run, had increased to maniacal velocity; and the ship was fighting hard. It is doubtful if she was making so much as three knots an hour over the ground; and she was giving a constant imitation of a half-tide rock. She rioted down into resonant pits; she giddily poised on the frothing summits of mighty combers; she rolled and pitched so that the racing of her screw was nerve-shattering.

"Ay, ay, sir—if you'll run her off a bit," said Baxter.

"Scared?" The sneer was very apparent. "If she's run off she'll roll the guts out of herself, and you know it."

"Very good, sir." Without hesitation he clumped down into the swirling well of the foredeck, and ploughed a shoulder-deep way to the forecastle. Big water hit savage blows at him as he went; torn from his grip of a hatch-corner he was picked up and flung like a chip to the rail, half-over it, indeed. But his arm wedged in an angle of the fore rigging and gave him a chance to claw a spitting way back to safety. Only, Captain Collins didn't see him get back—he only saw the dark blotch on the white crest hurry towards the side.

"Watch your steering!" he volleyed to the wheelman.

"She's dead on her new course," answered the man surlily.

"New course? You're dazed! Been drinking? Who altered course? Steady her, damn your eyes!" The man mumbled into the collar of his oilskin. He knew he hadn't been mistaken—the order given was definite: to alter course a point off the wind. But it was his word against the captain's, so who'd believe a rotten shellback? Collins gripped the rails and stared into the white maelstrom that boiled alongside. The trouble of it all was that his feeling of inferiority persisted to an increased extent. Baxter couldn't trouble him any more: but Baxter's personality seemed still to dominate the ship.

"Any man calling himself a sailor ought to have hung on—he ought to," said the skipper. "How was I to know—?" To attempt to stop and lower a boat was madness made manifest; anyhow, no one had seen Baxter go. And it was a mate's duty, anyway, to see to the safe stowing of the anchors, no matter what the weather was like. The worse the weather the more important the duty.

"You'll need to ease her a bit, sir, before we can get a fair chance at the anchors." Collins's grip on the rail tightened, tightened until it seemed to him the solid steel must crunch. His teeth began to chatter; and his heart lumped sickly in his throat; there was an appalling emptiness in the pit of his stomach.

He tried to speak, but he couldn't: his voice was frozen within him. He owned a seaman's superstitions, the dead had come back to claim the killer!

"Not that there's anything wrong with them to speak of," said Baxter. A thin flash of lightning ran through the lowering murk overhead; and Baxter had a horrid impression of his captain's face, half-turned over his shoulder, white and drawn under its tan, its lips bared tightly back from uneven, chattering teeth; and eyes whose white balls showed ghastly. Fear made manifest was written there.

"Will you give orders, sir, or shall I?" asked the mate patiently.

"Let 'em sweat!" came in a strangled whisper. "Take hold here; I'm—I'm going below." He stumbled below after communicating course and details; and fortified himself with a four-finger tot of raw rum as soon as he could.

"Are you on your course?" Baxter asked of the helmsman.

"Right on, sir—if that is the course."

"What do you mean, Johnson?" Baxter treated the men like human beings; and was recipient of their confidences.

"Cap'n altered it a point southerly after he went down, sir; just afore she shipped that big 'un; swore blind he didn't do nothing of the sort, sir."

"Forgot, probably. I shouldn't worry about it, Johnson. Give me hold of her a bit and nip down and make some coffee—get a swig yourself."

The whistle in the speaking-tube between bridge and captain's room shrilled and gurgled. Baxter hooked a leg around the wheel and bent forward, just able to reach. Collins wanted to be sure that he wasn't a murderer, he wanted to hear the man's voice again.

"Don't try to drive her too much," he said.

"Very good, sir."

"Any signs of easing off?" He asked a host of unnecessary questions, simply for sake of the comfort of that deep, grave voice at his ear. No spectre spoke that way; although he could have sworn he'd seen Baxter go overside when the big comber poised and fell. Reluctantly he tore himself away from the speaking-tube; and catching sight of himself in a mirror adjacent he shivered. He wondered if Baxter had seen that peaked and livid face, and if, seeing it, he'd suspected anything.

"Not likely!" he assured himself. But Baxter wasn't a fool. Not that he believed Captain Collins had meditated actual murder: his wasn't a suspicious mind at all; but when you see a man's face wolfish and scared it makes you think seriously.

"He doesn't seem to cotton to me, to any great extent," the mate said, pondering over the jerking wheel-spokes. "And I don't know why—not that it matters, so long as I do my job. I expect he sets a mighty high standard—being such a good man himself."

Then he stopped thinking about that distorted visage and thought instead of the one right girl at home and this was a warming, heartening thought. Ordinary discomforts faded into insignificance when his soul was flooded with pictures of that kind.

DURING the remainder of the storm-kissed trip Collins made no further attempt to rid himself of potential rivalry. The *Colleen Bawn* behaved as she always did, handsomely. Bitter though the run was she came through with no more than her usual punishment: a boat hanging in slivers in the davits; a ventilator or two smashed flat. Her cargo wasn't injured; and she discharged it according to plan; the bad weather easing off while she was in port; only to quicken into livelier activity when she once more nosed out past the breakwater and faced the level run of the murderous seas. Nothing out of the ordinary had happened. A sling of cargo had slipped and dropped into the hatchway, missing John Baxter by inches; but all that was in the ordinary run of things—a mate of a raw-boned coaster like the *Colleen Bawn* was always one bare jump ahead of extinction, anyhow. The winchman running that hatch noticed that the rope sling was cleanly cut as to one strand and probably thought his own thoughts; but Baxter made no fuss about it. The freighter was homeward-bound, that was enough for him, home meant a look at the girl of his heart and a refreshing of homelike dreams. Life seemed a full-sized, pleasant affair enough.

Homeward they got all the weather they could wish for, and more. They passed a Waddiloe boat scuttling for shelter like a scalded cat, with white water breaking over her funnel top; and they sighted, as a livid dawn broke, a Bank schooner in her death-throes. She'd been caught aback in a lightning-quick shift of wind, and the sticks had been whipped clean out of her; they'd pounded at her hull like so many battering-rams before her people could cut the wreckage clear; and the schooner was settling fast.

"Game to try for it?" asked Collins. He couldn't order his men to attempt rescue under the conditions prevailing. He could only suggest, probably with veiled taunts. He'd earned a bit of a name for deep-water salvage work; he liked to read the big headlines in the papers; and it never occurred to him that the real credit belonged to the men who took the boat away, not the man who snugged under the bridge-dodgers and waited in comparative comfort.

Baxter nodded and stripped away his oilskin smock, standing out gigantic and lithe in jersey and seaboots. He'd almost been born with a boat-tiller in his hand, as they say along the coast; he couldn't remember the time when white water had held any terror for him. He passed the word and found men to follow him readily enough, men who'd learned his quality, and the smaller lifeboat was lowered out. They crossed the yeasty waste between ship and ship, more under water than over it; and plucked the schooner's crew from death's clashing jaws in the very nick of time. Before the boat's crew were warmed before the galley fire, the schooner had slid down to the Locker for good.

Collins nursed a feeling of savage disappointment. Some mates would have made a mess of that job and paid for their messiness with their lives. He'd hoped as he snugged there behind the dodger—hoped! You never knew; and Baxter had gone off of his own free will. But here was the big man back again, making no unseemly boasting about the thing that was done; giving praise to the men; and likely as not those men would talk.

They did talk, too, when the *Colleen Bawn* made her home port; but Collins didn't hear what was said. He'd applied for leave as soon as the ship was docked—not because he wanted leave exactly, but in order to prevent Baxter getting away to see the girl at home, of whom he'd talked in moments when confidences seemed in order. For though Collins hated Baxter, Baxter didn't hate Collins by any means. He admired him for a first-class sailor; a senior man who'd been fighting the sea when the mate was only shaking podgy fists at the whimpering winds. You can't hate a man you admire. But Baxter came near to disliking his skipper when he found that there'd be no getting away to see the girl and tell her how promisingly things were shaping; not even for the inside of a day. Nancy wasn't able to get down to the port, either;

when she wasn't working up in the city as a stenographer she was tending her sick mother.

Still, it had to be stuck out; and you didn't wedge yourself in your job by grousing. Nancy would quite understand; because she was of the understanding sort and she'd know that things were all right. Just a voyage or two more in the *Colleen* and they'd be married; and the sick mother shifted to the new home, and the city wouldn't have any claim on Nancy any longer. John Baxter, mate of the *Colleen Bawn*, could afford to support his wife in comfort without her having to work for her living.

Old Michael cocked an eye at Elijah Collins when he showed up in the office and stated that he intended taking a lie-off.

"Find ye can trust that boy, then? How's he shaped?"

"There's nothing to trust to him. Such repairs as are necessary the dock-crowd will see to. They know their job whatever he does."

"Disappointed in John Baxter?"

"He'll weaken on our job, can't carry the load." Venom sounded in the skipper's voice, and old Michael chuckled dryly.

"Didn't exactly foozle that schooner-rescue, did he?" The newspaper reporters had got the tale from the survivors, and they hadn't been sparing in their praise before Collins landed.

"Pooh, it wasn't more than a capful; he couldn't have held back for very shame; the men being anxious as they were."

"Well, it'll mean another gold watch for you, Elijah—you must be getting quite a sight of 'em by this time. And the papers speak well of you." He indicated an evening journal which went in for startling headlines. Elijah Collins's name was there for all men to read, but undue space had been devoted to the mate's prowess he thought.

"Judging by what Cap'n Stickleman says, it was quite a breeze," said old Michael. "You haven't got any real fault to find with him, have you?"

"He'll do, until someone better comes along; but he's young and hot-headed—well, he'll do." He was afraid that old Michael might smell a rat if he black-balled Baxter too freely. So he handed in his papers and got himself away to a lonely and itching holiday.

Old Michael took his stick from its appointed corner in his office and stumped rheumatically down to the docks, where he found Baxter doing the work of a dozen men and urging the crew to perform miracles.

"What's eating you, boy—doing the dockyard's work?" asked the owner.

"I always believe in the ship's folks doing what they can, sir; no use to run the owners into unnecessary expense."

"Shipowning'd be a pleasanter job if more thought that way. Comfortable?"

"Nothing to complain of, sir." He was aware the old man was watching him like a hawk whilst affecting not to do anything of the sort.

"That's the style. She's looking fine and natty, such of her as isn't crumpled up. You find the Bank Tail run a bit heavy?"

"It's the work I like, sir," laughed Baxter. "Fine weather yachting never had much to attract me. Maybe that's why I tried for your boat, sir."

"Good spirit! We make 'em or break 'em, on the Bank Tail run. We make 'em sometimes. Seen your name in the papers, I reckon?"

"I've been too busy to look, sir." Old Michael nodded, staring round the shining decks. More than the neatness and more than the gallantry of the rescue, the new mate's wish to save him unnecessary expense warmed the cockles of his economical heart. Collins had never been a man to think of standing charges; he had a lordly way of reporting damages, as if paying tribute to his own prowess by the size of the repair bill.

"What's caused Elijah Collins to hate you so, boy?" he asked.

"Why—hate, sir? Hate? It never struck me—I'm a youngster and he sets a high standard; I expect I'm a bit raw. I wouldn't call it hating. He's only breaking me into his ways a bit. With all his service and what he's done—why, sir; if I can satisfy him after awhile—"

"Maybe I was wrong. Well, off you go, then!" Baxter stared at him, his mouth opening.

"Off, sir? Captain Collins is taking leave this trip."

"Away you go to that girl. I'll bet there is a girl; it's only right there should be. There'll be boats running on the Bank Tail route when you're overboard with fire-bars in your hammock; and there'll be men wanted to run 'em. There's Monkside kicking his heels idle on my payroll; he'll handle things here for a day or two while you're away. We pay extra wages to married men in these boats, did you know? And give a bit of a pension to widows. Off you go." Old Michael chuckled dryly as he saw the big figure, neatly garbed, speed down the quay; then he coughed and his eyes began to smart. His own boy, such another as Baxter, lay somewhere on the Bank Tail run, without the ballasting fire-bars; and there were times when he felt lonely.

MAYBE Drebbutt had said something; but during the next trip outward Collins felt he hated John Baxter more than ever. He brooded introspectively over certain happenings—old Michael sending the youngster off on leave the way he did—never before had that occurred to Elijah Collins's knowledge and the hate within him curdled bitterly. He saw how things were shaping; here was the owner's white-haired boy being taught already what was expected of him. There certainly didn't seem room enough in the *Colleen* for them both. Well, there were ways and means.

Off Threlsoe Heads the *Colleen* struck the nastiest patch of weather even Collins could remember to have seen, the wind coming hard and black out of the northeast, and the sea running mountains high. It was bitterly cold, for snow and hail ran on the crest of the gale; and Collins wrapped himself up in layer on layer of fearnaught underclothing when it came his turn to take the bridge. He had a lot to say to Baxter when he relieved him; and because his liver had been twitching unmercifully all through his middle watch below, he said it with fireworks. Had Baxter been less of a giant it is conceivable Collins would have struck him. But he contented himself with a biting tongue-lashing, finding fault with everything that had been done, not only lately but ever since Baxter joined the *Colleen*.

"There's one thing certain to my mind," he rasped; "and it's this. You'n I will never pull together; and I've twenty-five years' service in the company against your two-three months. Chew on that!"

"I'm doing my best," protested Baxter with the mildness of the big man. "If there's anything doesn't please you, sir, you've only to say it."

"There's nothing pleases me, nothing! Get below before I forget myself." They stood at the lee of the wheelhouse during the altercation. Baxter handed over the ship to his senior and clumped into the chart-room to write up the log.

"Full gale, ship laboring and shipping some water," he wrote with the seaman's estimate of what would have paralyzed a landsman. He went below and was on the point of kicking off his seaboots when the relieved helmsman rapped on his door.

"Begging your pardon, sir!"

"Yes, Croft; what is it?" The sailor was chewing tobacco; water streamed from his oilskins. He held a length of four-inch rope in his blue hands.

"Couldn't help overhearin' the old man when he was pastin' you, sir."

"That's his affair and mine, Croft. If you'd been attending to your steering, now—"

"Yes, sir; but being as you treat us fo'c'sle lot like white men, sir—next time the old man cuts loose on ye, show him this." He thrust forward the four-inch rope.

"Well, what about it?"

"That's the cargo-sling what carried away last trip, sir, that time you was so nearly flattened out as a toucher. See that strand there, sir? Clean-cut, ain't it? Who'd do that here aboard? Show that to the old man next time he slings his weight about and see what color he'll turn."

"I'd forget all about it if I were you, Croft."

"That's for you to say, sir. But if ever you want a witness call on me, see? I know who borrowed my sheath-knife that day in port; and I know who pitched the new sling down the hold."

"Mean to say the captain did that?"

"Sure as God, he did."

"All right. Don't shoot off your face again. Good night." Baxter sat turning the rope over in his two work-hardened hands. He wasn't a fool; and the unjust blame that had been hurled on him lately rankled. He knew he was doing his best; and he knew, too, that it would never be in his power to please Elijah Collins.

"He's promised me the sack, too," he thought. "This doesn't mean anything—even if Croft's right. And yet—"

He didn't want the sack, after the rosy

visions he and Nancy had seen together last time at home. He wanted to stick in with the line, where they paid a married man extra wages and pensioned his widow.

"It might be worth a shot," he meditated; and then, on the spur of the moment with anger rising, he charged out of his cabin and went toward the bridge. The *Colleen* was making a mess of herself. The new man at the wheel was raw to the job and he couldn't get the proper hang of the ship. She was trying to drown herself, and big water was smashing over her everywhere. It was a hellish night as Baxter stamped up the bridge-ladder. He saw the grandfather of all waves tower high above the bridge, held his breath as he snatched at a stanchion. Something was going to happen and it wouldn't be a trifle. He saw the wave fall, saw a dark figure swept resistlessly across the bridge almost within reach of his outstretched hand.

The thin reedy cry bit through the storm's clamor as trifling sounds sometimes do bite through the wildest din of hard weather.

"God, he's over!" snapped Baxter. He slithered to leeward and found himself hanging over a gap where the rails had been. Collins had gone—he saw a darkness amid the frothing white below. He still held the cut rope in his hand.

"Hard a stabbud!" he yelled through funneled hands.

If Collins died there would be no adverse report against John Baxter. If Collins died there would be a vacancy for a new man in command. And Collins had done his best to make things unbearable for Baxter. Collins couldn't swim a stroke; he'd often said so, vaingloriously boasting that a man was a coward to learn swimming; afraid to take his gruel when it was served.

Collins was overboard, fighting chokingly in the smother, dragged down by the weight of his drenched clothes. The waves, foam-capped, slashed at him mockingly, they poured into his open, screaming mouth. The Bank Tail run had claimed him at last; and he was afraid. He spat curses at the ship, at the run, at Baxter, at everyone and everything. They'd let him drown there in the dark, would they?

He remembered that slashed rope, too, he remembered a lot of things. It seemed to him that Baxter's accusing face was frowninto into his own, that Baxter's voice was triumphing over his defeat—Baxter's voice. Yes; it was Baxter's voice; that could be told even through the snarl of spray and roar of wind. Baxter's voice—

"Hold up, sir—hold up!" The mate's mighty arm plucked Collins to the surface as he was going down finally. Baxter had forgotten the cut sling and the threats of dismissal. With the end of the deepsea leadline knotted about him he had dived overboard like a flash after sounding the distress call on the steam-whistle; and he held Collins secure. The aroused deckhands hauled in hand-over-hand.

OLD MICHAEL chuckled again dryly. "I've been having a word with Croft," he said. "Seems as if you were a full-sized man, boy. What made ye go overboard that fashion—leaving the ship untended?"

"I couldn't let a good man die, sir, not without making a shot at it."

"You might have lost the ship by your foolishness."

"But I didn't, sir."

"All for a man who'd tried to scupper you—and perhaps aiming to murder you!"

"There's no proof of that, sir; these deckhands get fancies into their heads."

"He tried to damn you with scant praise; I've proof of that. Well, you'll take the *Colleen* this trip, boy—and you'll be the biggest man aboard still; as you were before."

Everybody's Meeting PLACE

Where writers, readers and the editor gather for informal discussion

MORE ABOUT WESTERNS

I SPOKE too soon. Last month I began this department by saying I hadn't received one letter very favorable to Western stories. That was no sooner in print, however, than stories from readers who like Westerns began to arrive. I was hreatened with all sorts of penalties if EVERYBODY'S didn't continue to publish hese tales of the old romantic West.

This letter from P. M. of Hollywood, however, is the one on the subject I found most interesting.

In "Everybody's Meeting Place" you asked for comments on your Western stories. I greeted that with glee, for it gives me an opportunity to air a very old grievance.

First I shall make an effort to establish myself on a sufficiently firm footing to qualify as a critic. Here in Hollywood one finds the queerest creatures alling themselves "Cowboys," attracted mostly by he possibility of work in pictures. And strangely nough a few real ones gravitate here at infrequent ntervals. To the uninitiated there seems to be little difference save the degree of loquacity, but gracious!

I have had the good fortune to marry an amazing creature who is by turn writer, cowpuncher, ranger, civil engineer, and horse breeder. He has tried nobly to educate me in the matter of brands and roping, but I'm a bit too stupid for one and too wkward for the other, and the only subject upon which we disagree is saddles. Then among my friends are men who saw the last Sioux uprising at the Pine Ridge Agency in '86, who have driven four and six head up over the old stage roads of the West, who knew Wyoming in the days of the dead line, who have been everything from bandit to sheriff. One of them at one time wore the black hat that was open acknowledgement of membership in the Hole in the Wall Boys.

It is the same thing that makes these men attractive and a "sidewalk" cowboy repulsive that makes or breaks a Western story. The fact that most Westerns provide these "Old Timers" with vast amusement is the thing which will eventually kill all Westerns regardless of their accuracy.

This is a comment made by one of my "desperados."

"Hell! This fellah's speakin' o' the Little Missouri an' Willow Creek all in thuh same breath!" And the magazine, one of those that count their circulation in millions, sailed into a corner, later to light a fire.

The same thing happens in moving pictures. I have been doing a synopsis or two for some companies that deal in "Horse Operas," and they insist upon the deletion of accurate and characteristic detail and the addition of impossible situations.

"We want more love interest, more action." That was the last thing I heard as I made a hurried exit when called to confer upon a historically correct tale of the activities of the Hole in the Wall Boys and the Union Pacific holdup in '94. The small matter of the absolute absence of any women in the original action made no difference, and my timidly added heroine wouldn't do.

True, when George Curry, the Roberts Boys, Tom O'Day, Walt Putney, "Cuz" and one other whom I shall not name were riding the "Big Road" there were a number of girls who figured in their lives, but when they were "on the dodge" they were too wary to have anything to do with women.

If every writer of Western tales were compelled to qualify by proving his ability to ride sixty miles a day, and that's not a bad ride; pack a horse; handle a rifle and revolver without endangering his own and his neighbor's lives; create cowboy biscuits; and show that he had really been west of the Hudson methinks that field would be a strangely empty place, in spite of the demand and the fact that it is a comparatively easy market.

There is a certain Eastern corporation that puts out a number of magazines of the "thriller" type. These publications will eventually kill really good Westerns by permitting the hero to visit his lady love in chapparajos and by dressing the "Old West" in the comparatively modern big hats. In other words they don't know what they are talking about most of the time, and you should hear the remarks from the "Old Timers."

EVERYBODY'S has been surprisingly free from that sort of thing, and by way of congratulation I shall tell you that on the twentieth of every month I am on hand to buy several copies for my "band of desperados." And they love it.

If EVERYBODY'S would only help change the cry from *Action* to *Accuracy* they would be helping to preserve one of the most picturesque, the most truly American portions of our history. As it is you are far better than the average.

Adios, amigos, and let's have lots of *real* Westerns, but in the name of Billy the Kid, cut out the "blood and thunder." It'd bore any one to death.

Now that's what I call a letter! And EVERYBODY'S will continue to do exactly as P. M. suggests and that is publish the best *real* Western stories we can find.

CHINA IN THE FOREGROUND

WHEN the Chinese trouble recently jumped to the front pages of the newspapers, it seemed to start everybody who knows anything about China writing about it. From the quantity of material that came into this one editorial office I selected *The Society of the Silver Shoe* as the most exciting story with a Chinese background that I had seen. It starts, you'll note, in this issue.

MAJOR CHARLES GILSON who wrote the story has innumerable books and stories to his credit. He first gained fame as a writer of books for boys, books that as the critic of the important London paper, *The Daily Mail*, said were "real literature."

Major Gilson, of course, knows China. He has traveled all over the world, been twice to Australia, three times to Japan, has voyaged among the South Sea Islands and the East Indies, and, for a change, taken occasional trips to East Africa and America He has not only lived in China for some years but has actually fought there and was placed on the retired list for wound received in service in China and Singapore

I have no doubt, however, that you'l know he knows whereof he writes whe you read *The Society of the Silver Shoe.*

A STORY FROM THE BLACK HILLS

THE preponderance of stories in Ev- ERYBODY'S are written by men. It is only occasionally that a story by a woman appears. That is not because we have any prejudice against women writers but because it is more natural, I suppose, for men rather than women to write stories of adventure. And I believe you'll thoroughly enjoy *Tiger Belle* by FRANCES HALLEY BROCKETT in this number. Mrs. Brockett has had a colorful life herself. She writes:

> My mother and father came into the Hills a bride and groom—on the old Sidney stage coach t Deadwood—and the coach they were on was attacked by Indians. My father was a telegrap operator in charge of running the wire through fro Cheyenne to Custer, the first connection of th Black Hills with "outside." By a blazing bonfir where a mass meeting of miners, prospectors and adventurers gathered around, he set up his instru ment (1877) and flashed the first message across th wire to Cheyenne, signifying the completion of tele graphic communication, amid great cheering an joy of the gathered pioneers.
>
> I was born in Dakota, took an A.B. degree a Wellesley, taught in Atlanta, Georgia, then wen abroad for a Mediterranean cruise, and attende the University of Lausanne, Switzerland, for a yea Then I came back, visited Cuba, and went to Cali fornia where I accepted a position to teach Frenc in Los Angeles. Then I got married and came bac to the Black Hills to live. I have at last found tim and opportunity to develop the scribbling streak have always possessed. I have published a fe poems and one other story, but this is the first stor in a magazine that I am willing and ready to bra about.

TRAINING FOR WRITING.

IT REALLY does seem that to writ stories of adventure one has to qualif with a life of adventure oneself. An other writer new to EVERYBODY'S is FRE ERICK MOORE with his novelette *Parmley Reward* in this issue. Mr. Moore writ about himself in the third person as fo lows:

> Frederick Moore writes adventure and detecti stories because he spent several years at soldieri

loring and newspaper reporting. He works in a ew York skyscraper building, and from the nine-enth story looks out over Central Park and keeps gular office hours at his typewriter. "The neces-ity for hard work—and writing is close and confin-g hard work—has tamed me somewhat," he says, but I still have a bad case of wanderlust. I have en so many places in the world that I am regarded s either a professional tramp or a first-class liar if attempt to list the ports I have seen. I shipped ith Handsome Charley Ballem in a cattle boat at fteen, out to Boston, when cattleboats were not he modern liners of this day, but were hellships. he first part of the routine was to batter up the attle crew with clubs to show them who bossed the hip. I got mine—and have made a fairly good liv-g out of the characters I met in various ships. I ent around the world in the cavalry before dough-uts were on the menu, and that has paid me well. f I were twenty again, I'd hunt the first recruiting fice or the first ship sailing. Hardships pay the est dividends for writers, and a winter in Siberia ith seventy-four degrees below zero left my bones ith a permanent chill—and a couple of books that rought comforts later.

AMONG THOSE PRESENT

FOR the rest you'll find old friends in this issue. H. M. Sutherland, Anthony Rud, Walter W. Liggett, ohn Steuart Erskine and Frank Shaw ave all contributed one or more stories be-ore this. I think Sutherland and Liggett ave done awfully well for us this issue. s I've said before I try to get one highly umorous story in every number and it's utherland who's done it for us this time nd I haven't read a better and more hu-an prize-fighting story than Liggett's in long while. Have you?

Another writer new to Everybody's is rthur Chapman. I haven't any bio-raphical material about Mr. Chapman ut I know he's a newspaper man and that e wrote that famous poem *Out Where the est Begins.*

AMONG THOSE TO COME

DURING the summer months the sales of a magazine slump somewhat. That's to be expected. But with he September number they begin to jump gain. Or, at least, they should if readers ake a healthy interest in the magazine.

For this reason, in September, I'm putting y best foot forward. I've gone over the aterial I have on hand and picked abso-tely the best stories I have for the Sep-ember issue.

You'll find a number of the writers present who are helping to put over this new Everybody's — Captain Dingle, Ared White, William Corcoran, Frank H. Shaw, Walter W. Liggett.

Captain Dingle, of course, contributes a sea story, *Roll and Go;* Ared White will be represented by a particularly fine war story, *Monsieur Dix;* William Corcoran, whose Western stories receive praise both from people who like Westerns and those who don't, will be in the September issue with a novelette filled with action, revenge and fighting but which also manages to convey somehow the futility of this incessant bloodshed. In other words, it's quite unlike the usual Western. And so on.

There's also a first rate novelette by a writer new to the new Everybody's—T. T. Flynn. Mr. Flynn's story is called *Tin in the Jungle.*

It's easy to say this September issue will be the best we've published so far—but I really think it will be. Write and tell me I'm wrong if you think so.

WE'RE IN THE NAVY NOW

IN CONCLUSION, I'm going to puff out my chest a bit and publish this letter from P. R. K. of the U. S. S. *Simpson* sent to Everybody's from Manila:

> Just a short note to express my opinion of the new Everybody's Magazine. Think it is now the best of the many adventure magazines on the market and here aboard ship we receive about all that are published, so that is saying something. What?
>
> Discovered by accident a well read and dog eared copy of the January issue while we were in Nanking, China, last month. Reading material was at a premium at that time so took the copy up to the radio shack to pass the time away. Once started I read the entire magazine and every story was first rate, a thing that cannot be said of the majority of adventure story magazines. Since arriving in Manila have procured the February and March issues and made arrangements to have later issues forwarded to me.
>
> Best o' luck to the new Everybody's and congratulations to the originator of the idea.
>
> P. S. The entire radio gang heartily endorse the above.

Now, having finished writing about September, I'm going away for a brief vacation over Decoration Day. Bang! Down goes the top of the old desk! And good-by, with the best of luck, for the present! O. G.

THE NEWS OF NEXT MONTH

Three Exceptionally Fine Novelettes

TIN *in the* JUNGLE

By T. T. FLYNN

"The devil walks with Vega and Jacobs!" declared Gilbert when Mary Hopkins came out to visit her brother in the East. Vega and Jacobs had taken possession of her brother's plantation—and her brother was dead! One excitement follows another in this crisply told tale.

PRAIRIE FEUD

By WILLIAM CORCORAN

Beneath the Western stars, men wage war upon other men—and to what purpose? Another story of the West that Corcoran knows so well.

AS GOD MADE THEM

By FRANK H. SHAW

Wrecked on a desert island! But this time there are three men and a woman and each man is almost driven mad by want and hunger and a desire for her favor.

And Short Stories by

CAPTAIN DINGLE • ARED WHITE • WALTER W. LIGGETT

Each writes of the life he knows so well! Captain Dingle of the sea, Ared White of th war, Walter W. Liggett of the West. And something more you won't want to miss i Thomas Thursday's humorous story, *Westward Ho! Kum!* Besides other short storie you know, and the two serials.